

Executive Viewpoint

ONE-ON-ONE WITH DAVID POWNER

GAO’s Director of Information Technology Management Issues describes his agency’s progress on infrastructure.



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The federal government’s “Cloud First” policy is supposed to be the governing mandate on how agencies acquire and deploy information technology systems. However, a number of agencies are not yet on that path or are not very far along. David Powner, Director of Information Technology Management Issues at the Government Accountability Office (GAO), studies federal government infrastructure issues from both the agency and interagency levels. Powner recently spoke with journalist Francis Rose about what he sees government doing now with infrastructure and what he sees agencies doing moving forward.

Rose: Data center consolidation is the dominant IT infrastructure issue in government right now. Where does that effort stand? Do the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and GAO have a handle on the number of data centers yet? Are the numbers even the most important metric to understand in data center consolidation?

Powner: We’re starting to get a good handle on the numbers. The inventory changes are slowing down. We’re always going to find a few things here and there, but that’s starting to solidify. Obviously, the focus so far has been on those inventories, what we’re closing, and the dollars we’re saving. That’s all well and good, and we still want to have some of that. But there’s also been a real shift toward focusing on the appropriate metric. Going forward, we really want to utilize the facilities efficiently, as well as the equipment within those facilities, so we’re truly optimizing these data centers.

Rose: If we’re still talking about metrics for measuring data center consolidation and maximum utilization of servers, we’re not going to make a broad-based transition to the cloud for a long time to come, are we?

Powner: No, we don’t have as clear a picture of the extent to which federal agencies are in the cloud, or which agencies are utilizing cloud services more than others, as we do on the data centers. We know we’re transitioning to the cloud somewhat, but the extent is unknown. We clearly know we’re not in the cloud to the extent we should be.

There are still too many agencies that don’t have credible transition plans. There are about ten agencies we see that really don’t have any plans, and we have made recommendations in our latest report for those plans to be put in place. Some agencies commented they had already conducted their consolidation and savings to date. They expected few additional consolidations and savings going forward. We went back to some of those agencies and said, “You can say you’re done, but you’re really not, because the metrics actually show you’re far from optimizing your centers.”

Rose: You mentioned the intention of FITARA to remedy the issue of who’s in charge of IT projects at agencies. The role of ensuring that happens falls to Congress. That could be potentially very difficult to do in the next nine to 12 months as we go through a presidential election and a transition from this administration to another.

Powner: There are several key things here. We’re expecting a new scorecard on FITARA implementation to come out in May. We also expect

Congress is going to ask the GAO to do a series of reports looking at FITARA implementation issues through the transition period.

A lot of good things are happening at OMB. They're doing a lot of solid planning. When you look at the strategic sourcing initiative the Administrator of Federal

What FITARA attempted to do was to say, "We've done a lot of work on data center consolidation, but we know there's a lot more work ahead because we're nowhere near where we need to be on meeting metrics, so let's get plans in the out years." Our work has showed that there are still too many agencies that don't have credible plans. I think you need to

those contracts?" We also looked at the key security measures in those contracts. There are a lot of folks that have a reluctance to go to the cloud because they want to maintain their own equipment and the security over that equipment, but you can also specify those needs adequately and still go to the cloud and accomplish what you need for your various missions.

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—David Powner, Director of Information Technology Management Issues, GAO

Procurement Policy Anne Rung has put in place, and many of the things that Federal CIO Tony Scott has put in place, you see great plans to implement the FITARA law. It's that combination of the legislative and executive branch working together that ensures we don't lose momentum throughout the transition period.

Rose: What do you think the biggest obstacles and the biggest breakthroughs are for agencies that are working through the consolidation and optimization process for their data centers right now?

Powner: We've looked at challenges and obstacles and heard lots of things over the last several years. We've heard that agencies don't have the right metering equipment in place; they don't have the management systems to estimate savings; they don't have good solid inventories of data centers. We're starting to get beyond those challenges. I think the big thing going forward in terms of challenges with optimizing our data centers, is do agencies have real credible plans going forward? Are they focused enough on metrics?

get those plans in place and you really need to focus on the key metrics going forward.

Rose: What are the important tools—technology tools, policy tools, or something else—that are helping agencies succeed at the consolidation and optimization?

Powner: There's no magic wand they can wave. You need to look at what your requirements are in terms of storage and the infrastructure needed to run your various applications, whether they are commodity or mission critical, and then make sound decisions on the best approach. Ask yourselves, "Are we going to maintain our own centers or are we going to go to a cloud?" That's the decision about buying versus building storage, and the security implications around both of those options. Ultimately, no matter what decision you make, you need effective governance over the execution, whether it's maintaining your own data centers or going to services.

We issued a report in early April looking at cloud contracting and service level agreements. One of the questions we examined was, "Are agencies getting the right performance out of

Rose: Plans are one thing, but the actual deployment, the actual execution, is a whole different thing. I imagine there are some cases where you're seeing plans but you're not seeing much execution.

Powner: We hear several things on that. One in particular about going to the cloud is that there are still many agencies that don't want to give up control. In particular, the obstacle is trusting someone with the data, and the security around that data.

One big issue at many federal departments and agencies is whether we have the right people making the right decisions. We know that there is commodity IT that is being acquired outside of CIO shops. We know there are large mission-critical applications that don't have enough CIO involvement. We really do need to get to a point where we have qualified and strategic CIOs driving a lot of these decisions in conjunction with business partners at the various agencies and departments.

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