Unpacking Sponsorships

Finding an initial agency partner is often the toughest part of getting FedRAMP approval for a cloud service provider. Why? Misunderstandings and conflicting ideas about roles can easily create confusion. But armed with the right knowledge and strategy, providers can more easily secure the agency partner they need and streamline the FedRAMP process. At Carahsoft's August FedRAMP Headliner Summit, experts on the "Unpacking Sponsorships" panel offered practical tips, debunked myths and provided real-world solutions. Here's what they had to say:

1. A "sponsorship" is actually a partnership

One big myth about FedRAMP is that agencies are just sponsors, not true partners. This misconception can be part of the reason many agencies hesitate to become initial agency partners, they worry that "sponsorship" sounds like it comes with more responsibilities and risks. However, that's not the case, said Karen Laughton, executive vice president of Coalfire. She points out that when cloud service providers change their language and approach to emphasize partnership rather than sponsorship, they often speed up the authorization process.

"Sponsorship indicates there is a higher level of responsibility, but at the end of the day, they are an agency partner," she said. "They're partnering with

you to shepherd you through the process, so they can leverage your cloud service. If you go into the conversation saying you are looking for a partner versus you are looking for a sponsor, they are typically much more open."

Many agencies already know the ins and outs of the Federal Information Security Management Act, so teaming up with a cloud service provider shouldn't be a big drain on resources or a steep learning curve.

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> Chief Solutions Officer, StackArmor

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"The beauty of FedRAMP is reciprocity," Laughton said. "At the end of the day, it's no different than FISMA."

However, not every agency can guide a company through FedRAMP, said Martin Rieger, chief solutions officer at StackArmor. FedRAMP partners should be viewed as strategic partnerships, and there may be associated risks.

"FedRAMP is a little different because it's not 'us versus. them,'" he said. "It's one big partnership. We're all working together to get that service available to the government so they have the tools, the technology, and the systems they need."

2. Identify the market need for the service to help select an agency partner

The first crucial step in landing the right agency partner for the FedRAMP process is making sure there's a real demand for your cloud service, Laughton said.

"Finding out what the demand is for your service is No. 1 for any market you're in, and the government is no different," she said. "Nine out of 10 times, there is an agency out there that needs the service you provide."

Subsequently, it's essential to initiate a relationship with that agency's liaison, who will guide the provider through the authorization process, Laughton said.

In some situations, there's an immediate need for a cloud service because it will benefit numerous agencies. Executive orders and new technology can fast-track the demand for a solution to be deployed. Then the cloud service provider needs to identify the right agency to partner with, Rieger said.

"That's a situation we're seeing more lately than we did in years before," he said. "The agencies who have a demand for the cloud service or that have the funding up front become better prospects."

However, industry partners warn about being diligent when selecting an agency. Given the long-term partnership nature between the cloud service provider

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and the agency, it's crucial to ensure consistency in personnel, said Matt Topper, president and solutions catalyst of UberEther.

While the agency is the partner, an employee assumes the responsibility of guiding the cloud service provider through the authorization process, Topper said. Ensuring the continuity of that person is vital.

"This can be a 6-, 12- or even 18-month process," he said. "If a person expects a promotion soon, it won't be their division or responsibility anymore."

3. Be prepared to begin the authorization process before seeking an agency partner

While it may seem self-evident, cloud service providers must demonstrate organizational readiness to substantiate their commitment to getting FedRAMP authorization.

If you're a cloud service provider having a tough time finding an agency partner, getting FedRAMP Ready can be a game changer, Laughton said. This status means a Third Party Assessment Organization confirms you're set to navigate the approval process. Not only does it prove you're serious, but it also gives you an edge in the market. Even before you find a partner, this can make agencies more likely to work with you.

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Topper and Rieger urge organizations to do all their homework before reaching out to a potential agency partner. This means finding an advisor, doing a thorough gap analysis and having a plan to fix any weaknesses. Basically, be as prepared as you can be before making that first contact.

"Have a mission to deliver," Topper said. "Say: 'We have done our work. Now, we need you to get us to the finish line.'"

Establishing a well-documented track record of compliance with relevant standards and certifications can further the cloud service provider's dedication to the FedRAMP authorization process.

Rieger advised providers to consult a knowledgeable FedRAMP advisor and present relevant experience and certifications as proof of their commitment.

Getting ready for FedRAMP might feel overwhelming, but it paves the way for a smoother relationship with agencies. It also proves you're committed to offering secure, compliant solutions, making it easier to secure that crucial initial agency partner.

4. Requiring FedRAMP authorization has significantly improved the authorization process

In December 2022, the FedRAMP Authorization Act was signed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act, making it mandatory for cloud service providers wanting to extend their product to the government.

"It has helped things greatly with agencies," Rieger said. "We've seen triple what we were seeing as more cloud service providers are interested in going through the FedRAMP process."

Additionally, agencies now seem to be more willing to partner with cloud service providers to usher them through the process. However, many agencies still hesitate to agree to the partnership if the cloud service provider is seeking FedRAMP High Compliance.

"Not every system should be FedRAMP high, though," Rieger said. "That's a consideration when seeking partnership — looking at the baseline and what type of data you are processing or transmitting — to see if it's the right choice."

Topper notes a big jump in FedRAMP High provisionals: Only four last year, but already 18 this year. He attributes this spike to new mandates and the growing range of services now available in the cloud.

Since the mandate, both cloud service providers and agencies have been taking the process much more seriously, Laughton said.

"It puts more teeth behind it," she said. "Now, you have to go through the FedRAMP process if you want to leverage a cloud service."

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