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Flexibility, a key to COVID-19 response, is imperative for cloud-based future

PROVIDED BY RED HAT

Adam Clater, Chief Architect, Red Hat Public Sector

Everyone talks about how the pandemic drove federal agencies to cloud computing en masse, how it accelerated the adoption of mass teleworking and how that became a catalyst for zero trust. While all true, it misses the bigger picture: What COVID-19 really forced everyone to understand and adopt was flexibility.

Flexibility of time because a lunch break could mean taking an hour to eat and relax for one person or caregiving time for someone else. Flexibility of place because some workers can't wait to return to the office, some don't want to return ever, and some even moved to a new region. Flexibility in hiring because agencies can access an expanded talent pool owing to remote work.

And that also means flexibility of service for federal agencies.

"The expectations of our users and IT consumers are that it's going to be an always-on, everything-as-a-service delivery model from government," said Adam Clater, chief architect for Red Hat Public Sector. "The days of a government agency being able to schedule an outage for three hours, or even for a whole day, because that's when it has its maintenance window, are untenable and no longer meets anyone's expectations."

That's part of the beauty of new technologies like containerization, microservices and the service mesh, all on the back of Kubernetes and Linux, Clater said. "We know that when used properly, these technologies can work together to make services more secure, more highly available and with less down time, delivering to the always-on-cloud-like expectations that modern workers and customers have come to expect, which requires an open, hybrid cloud."

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Finding value through broad cloud adoption

To extract the most value from cloud computing, agencies must use more than one cloud environment. Not everyone will find the same value in the same cloud environment. That's why agencies need to be intentional about building applications on their infrastructure. Because cloud computing is largely developed through open source technology, agencies tend to adhere to open standards, which provides the ability for tooling and interconnections. In other words, just because cloud environments compete, doesn't mean they can't work together, Clater said.

But that's not the only benefit. Once again, it comes back to flexibility. In this case, the flexibility for agencies to avoid vendor lock-in.

"An open, hybrid approach is also a smart way to insulate yourself from becoming too tightly tied to a single cloud provider," he said. "We think placing your eggs across multiple baskets — not building every application in a single cloud environment—is a smart idea. Whether it be for continuity of operations, or simply the ability to move workloads between cloud environments to maximize savings, having flexibility of where your workloads live will serve your mission better."

Additionally, that provides system integrators the flexibility to respond to and adopt newer technologies as they evolve and emerge.

For most agencies, continuity of operations is also a concern when moving to the cloud. If a cloud provider goes down, affecting services across the internet, agencies must be able to ensure services are still accessible.

"I think the more important issue is that we don't know what's next. We don't know what's next in terms of a cyberattack. We don't know what's next in terms of another pandemic. We don't know what's next in terms of infrastructure," Clater said. "So having that kind of flexibility for all of our federal chief information officers is imperative because we have to be able to adapt very quickly to what's going on in the world and with threats, cyberwise or healthwise. So all of that is integral, I believe, to every CIO strategy."

Planning for resiliency

It comes down to the difference between a proactive and a reactive posture. Traditionally, agencies have tended to be more reactive. But the pandemic helped change that as well. Clater said he's seen a lot of people in government who have learned that lesson and, as a result, decision-makers tend to be far more favorable to change than they have been in the past.

Agencies also need to be aware of the dangers of "pushing the easy button," as Clater phrased it. That could mean anything from going with an extremely low-cost solution to pushing timelines out so as not to have to deal with problems right away.

Agencies need to make sure they're making the right decisions at the right time for their specific missions, she said.

And the main metric for judging those decisions comes back once again to a familiar point.

"I think the biggest thing is flexibility," Clater said. "One of the things that I've learned here at Red Hat is that offering true flexibility now, and in the future, to our customers is imperative. They have to have this flexibility because they need to adapt to what's happening in the world, what their agency's mission focus demands and what their customers, the U.S. constituents, require."

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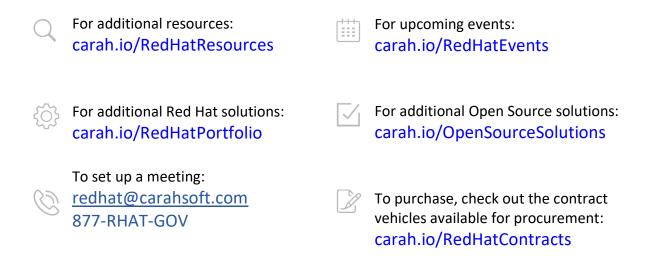
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