GOVERNMENT BUILDS NEXT-GEN CLOUD TOOL CHEST

As government agencies continue to move to the cloud, the hybrid cloud is emerging as the most secure and flexible platform.

FOUR YEARS after building a foundation for moving their workloads and applications to the cloud, government agencies have reason to expect a bright and productive 2016. New tools have emerged to help agencies adopt a new generation of sophisticated cloud platforms including the hybrid cloud, as well as new clouds-based services.

The combination of a long gestation period for agencies to get started with cloud services—provided by the federal government's "Cloud First" policy—together with the advent of tools designed to help agencies acquire more advanced and secure cloud services have put agency cloud investments on a solid footing.

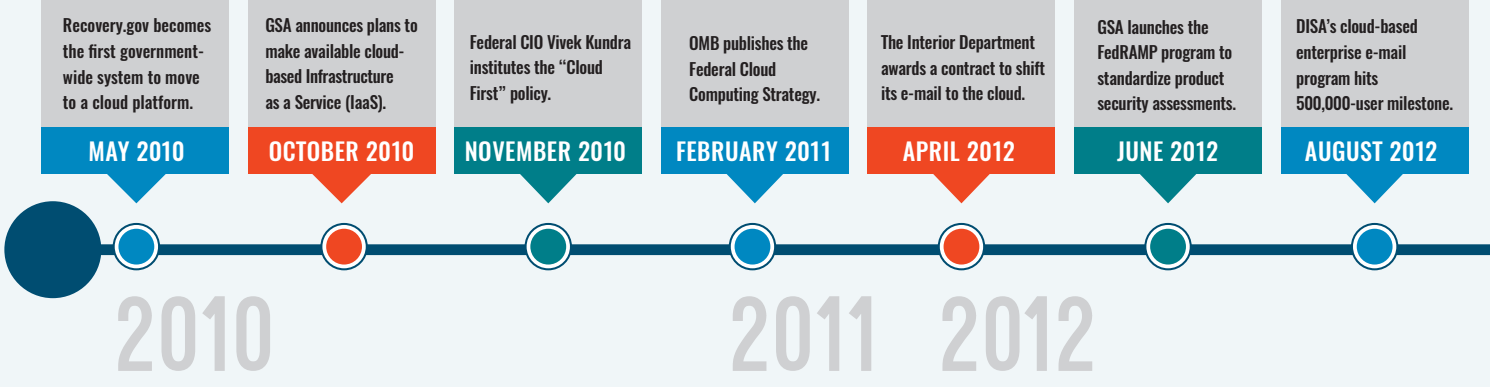
This outlook is reflected in studies that suggest the federal government's annual investment in cloud will grow significantly over the next several years. According to researcher Deltek Inc., federal demand for commercial cloud services will jump from $2.4 billion in 2015 to $6.2 billion in 2020, an annual growth rate of 21.4 percent.

Although Cloud First provided agencies a framework under which to pilot new cloud-based applications, starting with the Treasury Dept.'s cloud-oriented Recovery.gov, many believe the program has largely served its purpose as a launch pad for initiating cloud services. Government agencies are now moving beyond point solutions toward infrastructure as a service (IaaS) and platform as a service (PaaS) options that will require agencies to take a more strategic, enterprise approach in migrating to the cloud.

"Cloud First helped open the door for us to embrace cloud," says Greg Capella, acting executive director of the Enterprise Systems Development Office at the Department of Homeland Security. "But clearly the technology has evolved quickly."

Indeed, agencies are now taking advantage of more advanced cloud capabilities, including access to improved system and service virtualization technologies, the ability to migrate data and services between shared clouds, and the growing adoption of infrastructure-based services.

Government agencies are also more closely eyeing the hybrid cloud as their platform of choice, as that conveys the benefits of both the private and public cloud. As demand for these offerings grows, technology policymakers are seeking ways to accelerate acquisition paths for making hybrid cloud services available to agencies in the coming year.



GSA and DoD in particular are assembling a set of technical and acquisition tools to prepare agencies to adopt new cloud features and services. In an effort to increase agency cloud adoption, for example, GSA announced it is preparing groundwork for a cloud indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract designed to serve as a "one-stop shop and an improved way to buy cloud" system and services for federal agencies.

The timing seems right. GSA's cloud infrastructure-as-a-service blanket purchase agreement has already expired, and its email-as-a-service BPA will expire in two years. This sets the stage for an omnibus-type contracting vehicle helping agencies avoid gaps in the provision of cloud services, including IaaS. This contract "will serve as a single procurement source for all things cloud, with flexibility so as to incorporate valuable cloud services and technologies that emerge over its lifecycle," says Mary Davie, GSA assistant commissioner of the Office of Integrated Technology Services in a blog post.

GSA also joined forces with the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) to vet the project. The two agencies have been able to identify more than 200 requirements and other desirable features that support DoD's "rigorous security requirements and accommodate other buyers with similar needs."

Cloud-accelerating program tools are also in the works. GSA's Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies (OCSIT) wants to expand its cloud efforts by creating an "IT portfolio of cloud products" that can help agencies in their transition to the cloud. In an RFI on the plan, GSA said agencies still face obstacles to moving to the cloud, "including a long procurement process, unclear budgets and no insight into current legacy systems."

Agencies need a broad source of tools, platforms, and consulting help to do this right. "The OCSIT cloud portfolio has the opportunity to shine the light on this path for an agency customer to have a direct journey to the cloud," according to a statement in the RFI. "No matter where an agency is on their journey to the cloud, OCSIT wants to be able to deliver a product or service that will help an agency get to the cloud faster, with less confusion, and no errors along the way."

To support developing a cloud portfolio, GSA has also undertaken a program—called "Cloud Special Item Number" (Cloud SIN)—to provide agencies with centralized access to cloud services through the federal government's mammoth IT Schedule 70 acquisition contract. Using this tool, GSA customers can distinguish cloud services from non-cloud IT products and services in order to quickly arrive at the right solution.

"The goal of the Cloud SIN is to provide customers centralized, streamlined access to cloud computing services through IT Schedule 70 to meet their eligible government, state, and local needs," according to the Cloud Computer Program Management Office. That office has managed more than $450 million for dozens of cloud acquisition awards, either directly through its own cloud acquisition tools or by helping agencies direct their cloud orders to GSA IT Schedule 70 alone.

Besides contracting and consulting support from GSA, government technology policymakers also moved early this year to strengthen the security of agency cloud investments. The Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) is readying draft baseline standards and requirements for cloud systems that warrant the highest levels of government information security, such as law enforcement, personal health and national security-related data. Together, these new tools and policies should give agencies latitude to deploy a range of cloud tools to support current business objectives and requirements.