Don’t Let Fear Stifle Cloud Opportunities

Expert Advice on Cloud Adoption



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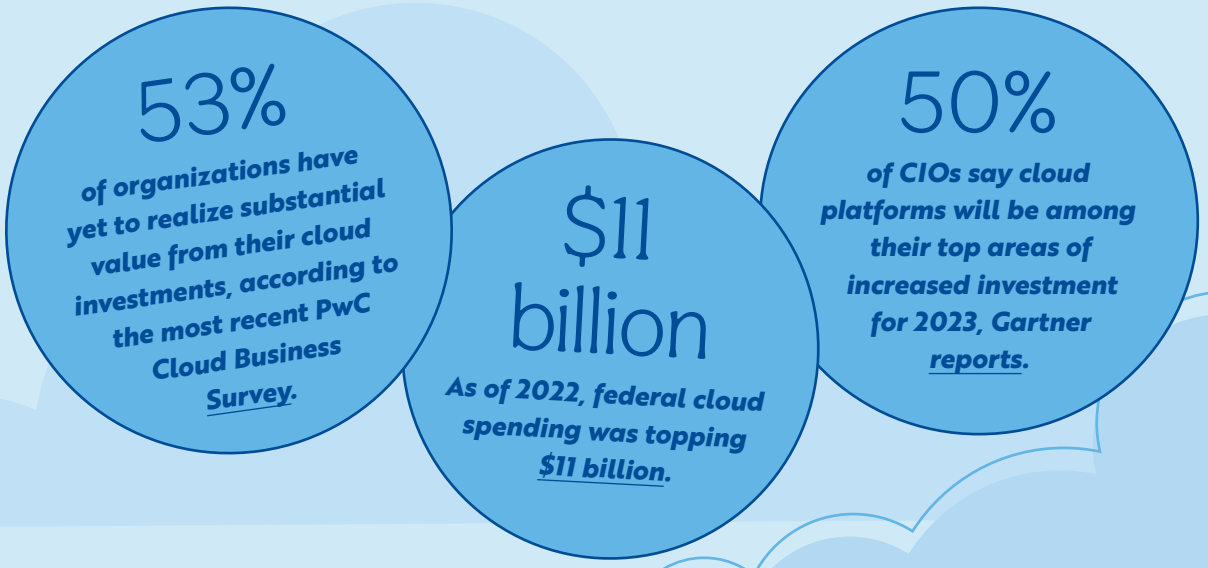
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Introduction

Under the federal Cloud Smart strategy, government agencies have embraced the cloud as a means to reduce costs and elevate citizen services. Now they're looking to do more.

Rather than talk about getting to the cloud, agencies leaders now are asking: "How do I drive more capability in the cloud?" said Bryan Walter, former General Manager and Vice President for Federal Solutions at Gordian. He spoke at a recent GovLoop online training, Top Reasons Agencies Are Moving to Cloud in 2023.

By focusing on the cloud journey, the expert panelists agreed, agencies can begin to see a greater return on their cloud investments.



Two Dimensions of Cloud

Agencies can think of the cloud from two angles: technical and operational.

- As defined by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), cloud solutions exhibit five essential characteristics: on-demand service, broad network access, resource pooling, rapid elasticity and measured service.
- The federal Cloud Smart strategy encourages agencies to think of cloud "as an array of solutions that offer many capabilities and management options to enhance mission and service delivery."

Overcoming Cloud Hurdles With Best Practices

Agencies may encounter a number of hurdles as they seek to make more and better use of the cloud, but strategic thinking helps chart a path to successful cloud adoption. Here are three potential hurdles that agencies may encounter along the way, with expert advice on approaching each:

HURDLE #1

Perceived Risks to the Mission

Agency leaders may be reluctant to go all in on cloud technology, given the high-stakes nature of their missions. In many cases, cloud supports "mission-critical applications that have life and limb at risk," said André Mendes, Chief Information Officer at the U.S. Department of Commerce. There may be "a certain amount of fear of moving away from a circumstance that you have been extremely familiar with."

To overcome inertia, it's important to view the cloud as a journey — an ongoing process of improvement — rather than viewing migration to the cloud as an end in itself.

A "journey" mindset can help agencies overcome the cultural resistance that can diminish return on a cloud investment. "It is really almost as much about the experience and the comfort factor you give to the people involved in it as it is about the technology," said Josh Marpet, Vice President of Regulatory Strategy at Earthling Security.

SOLUTION

Develop a Strategy and Roadmap

In line with the view that the cloud is more of a journey than a destination, agencies need to develop a strategy and a roadmap to overcome the cultural resistance they may encounter.

Business-line leaders may be reluctant to give third-party cloud providers control over mission-critical data and systems. Agencies may be unwilling or unable at first to dedicate funding or personnel to the massive effort needed to make outdated legacy applications cloud-friendly.

To overcome reluctance and maximize the value of a cloud implementation, sit down and plan it out, said Marpet. Then communicate that plan — and the measures being taken to protect mission-critical data — to key stakeholders who are resistant to cloud migration.





HURDLE #2

Cost Management

The Government Accountability Office reports that agencies typically devote about 80 percent of their IT spend on the operations and maintenance of existing IT investments. Rather than continue to invest in the care and feeding of legacy infrastructure, agencies may turn to the cloud as a way of reducing their IT operating costs.

Too often, however, those savings fail to materialize. Agencies may underestimate the cost of storage and compute time on the cloud, or they may migrate in a way that causes over-utilization of cloud resources.

SOLUTION

Be Realistic About Resources

Agencies may lack the staff they require to get the most out of the cloud, or they may have to pay exorbitant vendor fees to fill the talent gap, thus diminishing the return on their cloud investment.

IT leaders need to be realistic about the financial and human resources available in support of their transition from on-premises to cloud. "There is a substantial amount of time during which there is some parallelism of both operations, and the federal government has never really had a good solution for parallel efforts being equally financed," Mendes said.

Here, again, thoughtful planning is key to making the most of what is available.

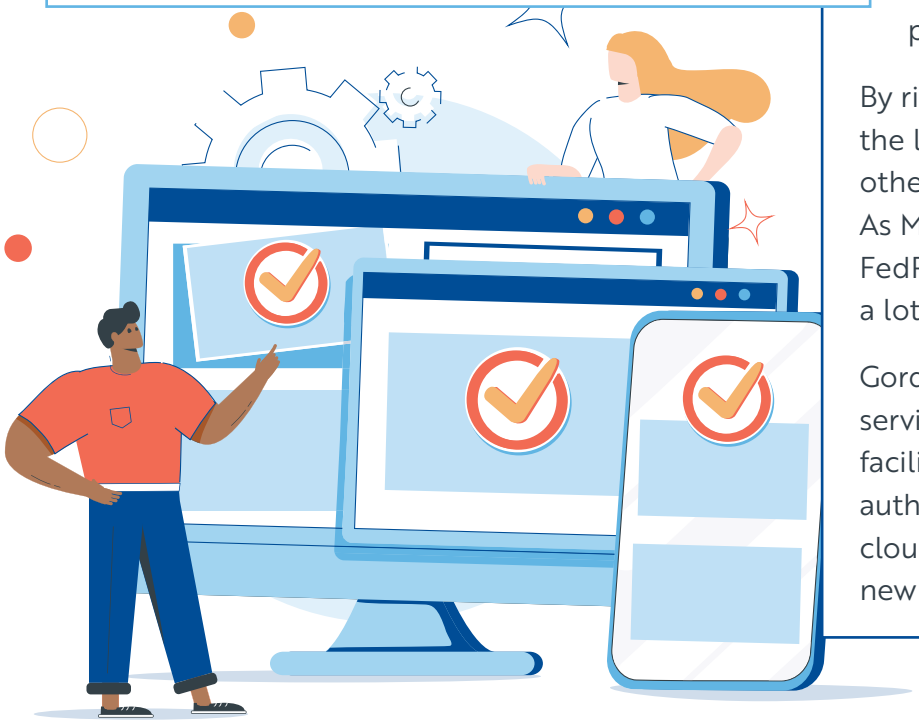
Strategic cloud usage helps. Agencies can take a close look at the applications they're running in the cloud and negotiate with cloud providers for long-term contracts. With fixed monthly expenditures, "it's a predictable, budget-able amount," Marpet said. This can help drive savings over time, as IT finds those cloud offerings that align most closely with their actual usage.

HURDLE #3

Cybersecurity Concerns

In an ever-more-adversarial cybersecurity environment, some have been reluctant to entrust sensitive data and applications to third-party providers. Concerns about security may hold an agency back from making full and best use of cloud resources.

Agencies can allay these fears by leveraging tools authorized through the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP), which provides a standardized approach to security authorizations for cloud offerings and is overseen by the General Services Administration (GSA).



SOLUTION

Think of Security Differently

Frequent attacks by nation-state actors and criminal groups have elevated federal IT leaders' concerns. "Those cybersecurity challenges are real, and getting heavier every day," Walter said.

In the on-premises world, agencies had hands-on control over network protections. Cloud requires them to think differently – to move toward a model in which security is a shared responsibility between the agency and the cloud service provider.

FedRAMP offers a way forward, Walter said, by establishing a standardized approach to cloud security. By leveraging FedRAMP-authorized products, agencies can make the most of their cloud investments, while still upholding rigorous cyber protections.

By rigorously testing a product's code, FedRAMP greatly increases the likelihood that software will be free of known vulnerabilities and other potential security gaps, whether malicious or unintentional. As Mendes said at the 2022 FedRAMP Summit, "If something is FedRAMPed, then you've eliminated a lot of the risk. Not all of it, but a lot. [FedRAMP] provides us partners that we can trust and verify."

Gordian Federal Cloud, for example, is an enterprise software-as-a-service (SaaS) solution that helps agencies manage construction and facilities estimates, contracts and pricing proposals. With FedRAMP-authorized tools like these, Walter said, agencies are able to embrace cloud-based tools without having to worry that they have introduced new cybersecurity liabilities.

Why It's Worth the Effort

Maximizing the return on a cloud investment isn't just about cost savings, although that is a key part of the equation. Going forward, agencies are looking to expand on what cloud can do — to accelerate the mission, elevate citizen services and improve the employee experience.

"There is such strong capability and scale that organizations can get from the cloud," Walter said.

Many agencies, for example, can look to the cloud to support one-time or recurring events: e.g., disaster recovery or a tax-filing deadline. The cloud offers the ability to ramp up resources when and as needed in support of these exceptional requirements. That "autoscaling" ability is a key benefit of cloud innovation, Walter said.

Cloud supports resilience as well, delivering on the mission even when circumstances such as emergencies or natural disasters might have made local resources unavailable. With redundant workloads and multiple physical servers, cloud helps agencies ensure business continuity in the face of local network outages, power loss or other unexpected events.

Likewise, at a time when data drives the federal mission, the robust computing power of cloud can help make that data visible and actionable in ways that were unavailable in the conventional data center infrastructure. "Cloud can do the most with data, and can do it quickly and efficiently, to gain those insights that are most important," Walter said.

It's not just the size and speed of the cloud that makes this possible, but also the power of the various services and applications that have arisen in the cloud space. Most notably, that includes services that leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning to support human decision-making.

"We're going to continue to see more innovation in that space," Walter said, "and the fact that it's enabled by cloud is going be more and more important."



How Gordian Helps

From construction planning and building to facility operations, Gordian empowers federal agencies to overcome their most pressing business challenges. Gordian Federal Cloud, an enterprise SaaS solution, is a comprehensive suite of modules equipped with the tools and cost data needed to better manage construction and facilities estimates, contracts and pricing proposals.

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