

Cloud Services Provide 'Another Tool' in the HR Toolbox



by: Julie Davidson, cyberFEDS® Editorial Director

Key Points:

- Cloud computing can streamline functions, save resources
- Experts agree routine HR functions are suitable for a cloud environment
- Security, privacy issues must be addressed

WASHINGTON -- When it comes to the future of federal HR technology, many experts say look to the cloud.

Cloud computing, they argue, can streamline functions, save resources, and allow HR professionals to get away from transactional processing and focus on more strategic efforts.

In essence, cloud computing, according to Glenn Davidson, executive director of public sector for EquaTerra, is essentially the use of huge collections of Internet-connected servers -- instead of the agency's own physical infrastructure and data centers -- to process and store data and deliver business applications.

A good example, Davidson said, is the USAJOBS Web site, which is maintained by Monster Government Solutions through the Office of Personnel Management.

"More organizations will adopt HR services via the cloud because of the current economic conditions," Davidson said. "They simply won't be able to afford the capital outlay associated with purchasing licenses, implementing applications and maintaining systems."

David Wyld, a professor at Southeastern Louisiana University, said most routine HR functions like payroll, employee benefits administration, and training are well-suited to a cloud environment. Having these services in the cloud can also allow HR staff to focus on more "value added activities."

Andrew Jackson, the Interior Department's deputy assistant secretary for technology, information and business services, agreed that "most HR applications are well-suited for delivery in a cloud environment," but said his department is taking a "crawl, walk, run strategy," and beginning with more low-risk minor applications.

In the meantime, the DOI is evaluating how to adapt existing HR applications to make it "easier to migrate" these services in the future," he said.

The benefits

The benefits of cloud computing, according to Jackson, are threefold:

- The "very nature of a cloud-based environment provides multiple methods for streamlining services and cutting overall costs." As a result, implementation time for a project can be cut by "as much as six months depending on the length of the purchasing cycle" in the agency, he said.
- Under current systems, agencies have to have capacity for peak utilization times. In the cloud, they can purchase services on demand based on needs, so it can ebb and flow with usage
- Services can be accessed from anywhere, helping agencies with offices all over the globe offer users "shared applications ... in a standardized, consistent and cost effective manner," he said.

Issues

Most concerns are security-related. HR transactions inherently deal with sensitive employee information that must be protected. Wyld and Davidson said cloud vendors are going to extreme lengths to implement security measures.

Kevin Paschuck, vice president of public sector at RightNow, which has been providing cloud services to the federal government for about 10 years, said his organization offers three types of clouds:

- A commercial cloud.
- A dedicated public sector cloud.
- A Defense-only cloud.

All three, he said, have stringent security safeguards in place. The public sector and Defense-only clouds meet all the standards set by the National Institute of Standards and Technology and Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12 for access to government systems.

"We've spent millions of dollars to protect our infrastructure and make sure it is secure," Paschuck said. "We add in extra security enhancements and infrastructure that government agencies do not have the budget to do."

Paschuck challenged the myth that a lot of information should not go in the cloud.

"Other than command and control and sensitive intelligence information, the trend is pushing as much into the cloud as possible," he said.

What to consider

Davidson said cloud services are simply "one more tool" for federal HR departments. When evaluating how to move forward and best provide HR services, Davidson said to consider the following:

- Current and future requirements, including what services should be handled in a centralized location and which can be handled remotely.
- Whether services can be delivered from an internal or external application.
- What transactional services need to be done in-house and which can be done by a contractor or shared service center.

"Then you can do a cost-benefit analysis and decide how to best move forward," Davidson said. "For those services that can be delivered in a cloud environment, then you can look at how to address security and privacy concerns as well as transitional costs and availability."

Davidson pointed out, however, that agencies should maintain a "strong, local HR presence."

Agencies need to have HR professionals who "understand the mission of the agency," he said, so they can help attract and retain the right talent.

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