Massachusetts CTO Offers 5 TIPS to Optimize State and Local Cloud Migration
CLOUD IS HAVING A MOMENT. As the government modernizes its IT and updates legacy systems, cloud applications are driving this technology refresh, boasting scalable and cost-effective solutions. But how can state and local governments best migrate to the cloud? Why should they move off-premises? And what are some key considerations to picking the right vendor partner?

In a recent interview hosted by GovExec’s Senior Vice President of Federal Technology Andrew Warner and sponsored by NetApp and Arrow, government top technologist William Cole, chief technology officer for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, shared lessons learned from his state’s cloud migration. Here are some takeaways from that discussion.

1. CONSOLIDATE TO STANDARDIZE

Seven years ago, Massachusetts had over 20 data centers in multiple states; some desperately needed upgrades — and others weren’t fit to ever be a data center, said Cole.

“We kind of had that sprawl of not only the number of data centers, but the various platforms and products run within — it felt like we owned one of everything,” he said. It made sense for the Bay State to consolidate in order to better standardize platforms and cloud providers.

“It was really at that stage that the light bulb went off and we said, ‘Yes, this is the future, this is where we should be going. We shouldn’t be running all of these various smaller data centers or in large data centers on-prem any longer,’” Cole said.

2. COLLABORATION IS KEY

Having everyone on the same page is vital to these kinds of efforts. Seven years ago, few state and local governments had moved to the cloud, so Cole and his team had to think of ways to convince stakeholders it was the right thing to do.

“We put together a presentation and I went on a road show, just selling this idea, this strategy to leadership to down-in-the-weeds technical people on the various IT teams across the executive branch,” he said.
Even though they met some initial resistance, once their meetings were over, they had convinced — and even excited — their audiences.

“We spent a lot of time with training and education and trying to get the folks that were going to have hands on keyboard to have a solid understanding of not just the technology and how to do it, but why, what are the benefits of doing it?” Cole said.

**3 EDUCATE AND RESKILL**

Nothing stays stagnant, but the cloud brings a massive leap of change to the technology, how it’s managed and who manages it, Cole said. He and his team took the time to explain that a cloud migration wouldn’t eliminate jobs but slightly change them. They also seized on the opportunity to look at people’s roles and skill sets to pinpoint how certain jobs would evolve.

“That kind of organizational change management needs to be built into any cloud journey, any cloud program that you’re going kickstart,” he said.
PICK A SEASONED PARTNER

Cole said the commonwealth knew it wanted help from an experienced vendor who could also teach the team about what it didn’t know. Consolidating into a single platform architecture and replatforming everything to cloud is a tall task. It was crucial to bring in the right vendor who could provide advice “so we weren’t starting off building a whole bunch of technical debt because we didn’t know what we were doing,” Cole said.

That partnership paid off: As COVID-19 hit and shutdowns occurred across the nation, the commonwealth was well poised to handle the influx of requests from the public thanks to systems running in the cloud. It also handled its virtual workforce with ease, enabling tens of thousands of employees remote access so they could do their jobs seamlessly.

“We were able to — in just a handful of weeks — deploy a virtual call center so hundreds of call center employees could work from home instead of coming into a building,” Cole said. “The cloud really made all of that so much more simple and quick to get up and running. It really helped us address the immediate needs of what happened during the pandemic.”
AVOID ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

With an effort like this, it’s easy to overthink, which could hamstring progress. Don’t let that happen to you, Cole warned.

“Even with all of the thousands and thousands of workloads we have running out there, pick something that’s low risk and get it out to the cloud,” he said. Find that low workload — perhaps a development environment or a QA environment — and move that first so you have some time to work through the mistakes you didn’t realize you made.

“Otherwise, you kind of get this analysis paralysis of just, I can’t do anything because I need everything perfect before I move my first workload to the cloud, and you’ll just get stuck in that and never move any workloads,” Cole said.

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