

**INDUSTRY INSIGHT**

Data center management distracts agencies from their missions

By Mark Gerard

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President Donald Trump took a small step toward dismantling the federal government's IT bureaucracy with his May 15 Executive Order to empower CIOs. This move could turn into the giant leap that finally brings a major part of our government's IT systems into the 21st century.

As they say, the devil is in the details of executing any complex IT strategy, especially one that has enormous potential for today's cloud service providers, data center operators and systems integrators. The ability to transform our government's aging IT infrastructure into one that befits the most powerful nation on Earth is something that is long overdue.

Given the complexity of the federal IT ecosystem, compounded by a stifling federal bureaucracy, it's no surprise that the president's EO renews calls for an "agency-wide consolidation of the agency's IT infrastructure" by eliminating unnecessary IT management functions, merging or reorganizing agency IT functions and increasing the use of industry best practices.

Most significantly, the EO requires that the CIO's role be dramatically enhanced to enable the implementation of appropriate risk management measures and that each agency be empowered to prioritize "procurement of shared IT services, including modern email and other cloud-based services."

Any massive consolidation of IT infrastructure typically requires migrating costly, resource-hogging in-house data center operations to professional, efficient data center operators offsite. The best-of-breed data center operators in the private sector offer a wide range of services -- from colocation to private, public and hybrid cloud services -- as part of a comprehensive data center solutions portfolio.

However, in trying to overcome vulnerabilities to data breaches and persistent cybersecurity threats, many federal agencies have been making expensive and inefficient forays into data consolidation by running their own data centers in the naive belief that they will be better protected if they control their own "sandbox."

And yet, the control of the sandbox is the elephant in many agencies' IT rooms: the poorly managed, snail-paced data consolidation and cybersecurity enhancements related to running their own data centers.

So it's high time the federal government got out of the data center business and looked to commercial IT providers and public/private partnerships to get the job done in a more timely and cost-efficient manner, as Trump's May 15 EO suggests. In fact, the implementation of one of the EO's key goals -- "enable agencies to reduce costs, mitigate cybersecurity risks and deliver improved services" -- requires adopting a "cloud-neutral" approach to data consolidation.

At the heart of this approach is a state-of-the-art data center designed with a deep understanding of federal government agencies' capital and operating expenditures.

A cloud-neutral data center offers the best of both the colocation and cloud worlds. The hybrid solution meets all the physical data center requirements -- geographical location, diverse redundant communications infrastructure and scalability on demand -- and includes on-premises cybersecurity services mandated by the federal government.

But even as the federal government begins outsourcing its data consolidation efforts as required by this EO, there must be a simultaneous paradigm shift in how it procures related IT services. The current model -- first selecting a prime contractor, which selects a technically relevant data center that meets the required specifications -- needs to be turned on its head. The cloud-neutral data center must be selected first or mandated in the government's request for proposals so the issuing agency is not stuck with a prime contractor that won't be able to deliver best-of-breed data center services.

Most of the major prime contractors that provide data consolidation services to the federal government do not own qualified data centers. They simply rent qualified rack space as required, even when data centers can amount to more than half of the total data consolidation solution.

In a cloud-neutral approach, however, a data center has the flexibility to bring in any cloud provider that meets an agency's needs, providing convenient proximity to critical vendors and offering access to public-cloud providers. This strategy features dedicated infrastructure services that ensure scalable computing and storage capabilities and, most important, meet the objectives of the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program and the Data Center Optimization Initiative.

The EO gives federal agencies and government contractors a golden opportunity to undertake their data consolidation efforts the right way. Now that federal agencies are prohibited from building their own new data centers, the government must start moving and maintaining its data offsite in highly secure, already available DCOI-compliant data centers specifically designed to meet its unique, mission-critical requirements. With their data in a state-of-the-art data center environment, agencies can focus on their mission rather than squandering time and resources on managing an IT data center that supports it.