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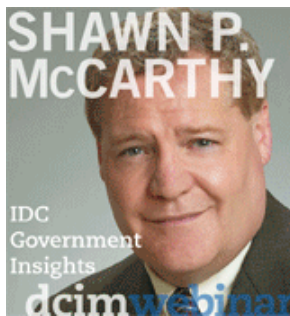Storage

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Khue Bui

Client Virtualization»

Desktops to Go

Moving client virtualization to the cloud offers significant benefits.

Karen D. Schwartz

posted February 8, 2012 | Appears in the Winter 2012 issue of *FedTech Magazine*.

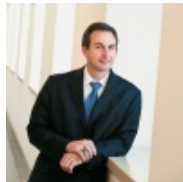Like   5   Share   Spice

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Last month, hundreds of Census Bureau employees began shedding their commutes and gaining free time, while remaining productive and fully employed.

Under a comprehensive pilot, many Census employees became candidates to access their computer desktops, complete with files and settings, from anywhere, on whatever device they chose.

The project, called the Virtual Desktop Initiative (VDI), began in 2010 when Census senior managers decided to find a solution that would let staff members securely access the files and applications they need remotely. Not only did the client virtualization program satisfy the requirements of the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, but it also reduced costs and created efficiencies.

The Census Bureau's idea is simple: Employees can access their full desktops, including personal settings and files, using only a web browser. The desktops are stored in a private cloud at Census headquarters.

The first employees to pilot the program were field and survey statisticians who work at home full time, yet needed the mobility to travel around the country. About 800 employees are in that category, although only some of them use the system, says Christopher Fudge, an IT specialist involved with the program. The bureau provided the employees with a kit that contains a notebook PC with security controls that prevent them from writing data to the device, along with a printer and a wireless Internet card.

Now that the full pilot has been rolled out, more employees are joining and using their own devices — such as notebooks and tablet devices — to access their desktops. To maintain security, users must provide two-factor authentication.

The full rollout schedule is aggressive: By the end of 2012, Fudge expects about 3,000 employees to access their desktops via the cloud. The system can scale to 10,000 concurrent users and beyond, he says.

Gaining Steam

The move to desktops in the cloud, although somewhat slow in the federal government, is gaining steam with agencies such as the Homeland Security Department and the Agriculture Department. That's because it offers significant benefits over standard desktops, says Robert McNeill, research vice president for the Cloud Business Services Research practice at HfS Research.

"There is less infrastructure to maintain, and users can access their desktops from anywhere," he says. "At this point, I don't know of any organization that hasn't implemented cloud in some way."

For the Census Bureau, the benefits are threefold. In addition to meeting telework requirements, the appeal of "green computing" is attractive. But perhaps the most striking benefit for the Bureau will be cost and time savings.

"The time it takes for the care and feeding of all of those desktops, including maintenance, patches and upgrades, virtually disappears with this model," Fudge says. "We can just patch and republish a master image, and because many of the employees will be using their own personal computers, we don't have to worry about hardware maintenance as much."

Progress Takes Time

The Department of Homeland Security is in the midst of a multiyear project that will move users in many of the department's 22 agencies to the cloud. The department's "workplace as a service" model, which will provide virtual desktops running VMware, remote access and other mobile services to DHS employees, launches as a pilot this year, with large rollouts scheduled for 2013. In his blog, CIO Richard Spires wrote in September that he expects to have more than 5,000 users on the desktop as a service model by spring. He noted that the department is establishing private cloud services to manage sensitive data in the DaaS model.

64%
Percentage of government IT managers who believe that cloud computing will reduce expenses while improving

telecommuting and mobility for federal workers

SOURCE: "Federal Cloud Weather Report" (VMware and MeriTalk, January 2011)

Larry Orluskie, DHS undersecretary for management, says that one of the first candidates for full rollout is the St. Elizabeth's campus in Washington, D.C., where the department is consolidating its headquarters.

"It is a perfect opportunity to set up this type of environment, because we are creating an environment from scratch," he says. "We wouldn't have to buy a lot of equipment, or relocate equipment, if we use the workplace as a service model."

The Agriculture Department is also on the path toward moving some of its desktops to a cloud-based model. David Shearer, USDA's associate CIO for international technology services, is working to provide the service to employees in the Farm Services Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service and Foreign Agriculture Service.

"As we look at the need for savings across the federal government and the potential this model holds for our employees, we are moving toward what our industry counterparts have already begun to do," Shearer says.

The model can save significant money and time for the agency, he adds.

"We have some customers we support out of the home who have the traditional style image, which sometimes means sending IT staff to the home. When you do that for thousands of seats, troubleshooting and maintenance are issues," he says. "This is a way to scale up people working at home in a cost-effective way."

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