According to a recent MeriTalk report, 75 percent of U.S. federal agencies want to move more services to the cloud. But of those that have utilized the cloud, only 53 percent rate their experience as a very successful one.

Welcome to the federal cloud dilemma: widespread desire followed by a measure of disappointment, wrapped in a cloak of fear and uncertainty.

“More than anyone else, government agencies are worried about data control,” says Mike Younkers, senior director of U.S. federal systems engineering for Cisco. “They don’t want to get locked into a situation where they can’t pull their data out.”

His point is corroborated by the MeriTalk report, with more than half of federal agencies indicating they are concerned with data integration, security, and portability in the cloud. Instead of jumping in with confidence and sound planning, Younkers says government agencies sometimes dip their toes in the wrong waters.

“The largest and most mainstream public clouds are very, very simple and they are cheap in the beginning,” he explains. “So agencies often use those services to test out the cloud, but they eventually run into data control issues, a lack of flexibility, and higher than expected costs.”

STRAIGHTFORWARD SOLUTION

Therein lies the 53 percent satisfaction rate. Fortunately, the solution to the federal cloud dilemma is a relatively straightforward one: have a strategic plan that addresses both near-term needs and long-term goals, and choose the best cloud provider accordingly.

“Agencies need to decide where they put their strategic control point,” Younkers says. “I’m not suggesting they shouldn’t use large public clouds, but if they walk through the wrong door, others may not open up. If they choose the right door, however, all the other options can be at their disposal, including those large public cloud offerings.”
The federal cloud dilemma

Perhaps the biggest revelation of the MeriTalk findings was the divergence between the agencies using proprietary versus open-source clouds. Satisfaction with data security and agility was much higher for those using open-source clouds than those in proprietary environments like the large public clouds Younkers referenced.

THE VALUE OF OPEN SOURCE

“Open source is not only driving much of the technology innovation in cloud, it is also enabling government agencies to answer their questions about cloud portability and integration,” says Mike Byrd, senior director of government channel sales at Red Hat. “In this way, it is not surprising to me that the [MeriTalk] survey respondents who have embraced open source reported greater cloud success.”

“Particularly with mission-critical systems, feds want assurance that they can integrate with legacy tools, and easily migrate data between the two,” Younkers adds. “Open source opens up new options. And feds using open source are reporting positive results.”

Younkers says federal agencies need to plan ahead. They need to thoroughly research and understand the pros and cons of each cloud and cloud provider they consider. And they need to look beyond short-term benefits, which can come at the expense of long-term flexibility, data control, and TCO.

“It takes some thought to determine overarching goals and the best approach for achieving them,” says Younkers. “But doing so will pay dividends. The cloud can be a boon for government agencies, as long as they make the right decisions.”

1 http://www.meritalk.com/cloud-without-commitment.php