



Accela and Microsoft experts answer the hard questions around cloud migration

Government IT leaders today generally understand that modernization means moving to the cloud – yet concerns linger.

Will financial savings justify the cost of a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) rollout? How hard will it be to migrate existing applications to the cloud? Will government see the uptime and reliability it needs? Does a SaaS solution adequately address government’s security concerns?

Experts from Accela, and its cloud-platform partner Microsoft, tackled these and other concerns in the webinar [SaaS in Government: Insider Insights to Cloud Success](#) that featured Dina Frandsen, the principal solutions specialist for Microsoft Azure, and Amber D’Ottavio, Accela’s director of product management.

Exploring ROI

An audience poll revealed that almost a third of webinar participants worry that a cloud migration will cost too much as compared to the potential benefit.

“Many people will be surprised when you do the math. There are definitely positive economics over time with SaaS,” D’Ottavio said.

She pointed to a range of often-overlooked expenses associated with on-premise solutions. There’s application support and maintenance, specific hardware and software expenses, and the cost of human capital in a tight IT labor market, which taken together, often add up to be more than the SaaS solution.

At the same time, government may experience a less tangible, but no less significant, opportunity cost when it remains doggedly tied to its legacy on-premise solutions. It can be hard to keep those applications current, and the talent shortage leaves many in a pinch when it comes to staffing and support for these systems.

On the flip side, Microsoft's Frandsen pointed to a number of factors that may accelerate government's embrace of the cloud.

Agencies may turn to SaaS when they need greater assurance around security and compliance, two areas where legacy systems tend to falter. They may lean toward cloud when software licenses reach the end of their support cycles. Most notably, government is turning to cloud as a way to implement rapid innovation and service enhancements.

"When you need to get new services out, the ability to leverage a SaaS provider such as Accela allows you turn on those services much quicker," she said.

Making the migration

Government technology leaders may worry about the effort it will take to rebuild existing solutions in the cloud.

In fact, "it's easier than you think," D'Ottavio said. Accela offers a range of pre-built solutions designed specifically around civic need, with modules that address business licensing, building and planning, community development, public safety, environmental health and other key areas. By implementing a pre-built, civic-focused application, "they are getting value out of their investment right out of the gate."

Some cities, for instance, have found they could offer online registration for short-term rentals within a matter of weeks, thus leveraging a pre-built solution to assert government's role in a fast-growing, newly-regulated space. When changing market conditions and evolving citizen expectations spark a need for rapid adaptation, SaaS "allows agencies to meet these needs without having to do a lot of customization," D'Ottavio said.

Availability and uptime

About a third of webinar participants worry about reliability in the cloud. Will an off-premise provider be able to deliver on availability and uptime? In reality, the cloud will often prove a more robust solution than an in-house deployment.

"Ensuring business continuity can actually be an easier problem to solve when you are running a SaaS solution," Frandsen said. "One of the reasons that providers are running on Azure is because of the confidence they have in the platform."

Microsoft operates 54 Azure regions globally, totaling over 100 data centers, and it's deploying more data centers each month. "The amount of focus and funds that Microsoft can put in that can make it a better environment than you would actually have on-premise," she said. "Accela is leveraging that network of data centers and regions to build out the business continuity."

Keeping control

Even as SaaS becomes a predominant model within state and local government, some in IT worry about losing control of their applications. The cloud is increasingly familiar, yet the prospect of relinquishing management tasks to a third party still makes some squeamish.

Accela addresses this specifically through a range of government-centered capabilities designed to enhance application management. "With the Accela civic platform and civic solution, we offer self-

service tools that give complete control to our customers,” D’Ottavio said. “This gives agencies ownership of their data and, moreover, it gives them the ability to utilize their applications more effectively. They can make changes to keep the site fresh without having to have a web designer involved to make those changes.”

Government agencies can use these tools to configure the user experience, organize the flow in the application, add new pages and make other changes without having to enlist an implementation team. This enhances the user experience and can even have bottom-line benefits, when used to smooth over the rougher parts of some business processes. “It improves the relationships with contractors and business owners and citizens, and it puts that revenue in the bank much sooner,” she said.

It’s possible to leverage such improvements even when working in an environment that embraces both SaaS and legacy systems. Governments likely won’t move all their processes to the cloud in one fell swoop. That’s why Accela aims to empower IT leaders to move what they can while seamlessly integrating cloud processes and on-premise applications.

“It’s one of the main reasons we selected the Microsoft Azure infrastructure,” D’Ottavio said. “You don’t need to be 100 percent SaaS or 100 percent on-premise to receive the benefits of tightly integrated solutions. We often see new SaaS solutions coexisting with legacy solutions.”

Secure solutions

Finally, the webinar addressed lingering concerns around security in the cloud. While some may still worry about data and processes that reside with a third party, Frandsen suggested Microsoft’s massive investment in this area should create a comfort zone.

“Microsoft is really serious about security and bringing our considerable resources to these problems,” she said. The company has trillions of URLs indexed and more than a million corporate machines protected by its enterprise IT security. It has decades of experience and is leveraging the latest in AI and machine learning to broaden its security reach.

“Because of our expertise, because of the visibility, because of the amount of traffic we see, we have the ability to learn from that and to get smarter and smarter about how we do this,” Frandsen said.

Having addressed all these concerns, the presenters looped back with a reminder of the basic value proposition on the table. What does government gain with SaaS? For those seeking IT modernization, SaaS offers a reduction in implementation time and faster time to value. SaaS delivers predictability through subscription pricing, and an end-to-end environment that would be difficult to build and maintain internally.

Most importantly to some, SaaS frees up IT to shift the emphasis away from the care and feeding of legacy systems, to focus instead on innovation. “Can you imagine if government agencies could focus on the important problems that they face every day in their communities, rather than just keeping the lights on?” D’Ottavio said. “We really want to help provide solutions that allow them to do that.”

About Accela

Accela provides market-leading SaaS solutions that empower governments worldwide to build thriving communities, grow businesses and protect citizens. From planning, building, licensing and permitting, to asset and service request management, finance, environmental health and more, Accela's offerings accelerate efficiency and transparency in governments of all sizes. Powered by Microsoft Azure, Accela's open and flexible technology helps agencies address specific needs today, while ensuring they are prepared for any emerging or complex challenge in the future. Accela's solutions serve more than 80 percent of America's largest cities. Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with additional offices around the world. For more information, visit www.accela.com