

Are agencies ready for EIS?

The massive telecom contract has the potential to reinvent IT infrastructure, but finding the bandwidth to take full advantage could prove difficult

The Enterprise Infrastructure Solutions contract is intended to help agencies transform their IT and telecommunications architectures, and a few fast movers are close to making awards through the \$50 billion acquisition vehicle. But as the migration to Networx — the previous governmentwide telecom contract — proved a decade ago, reimagining and then moving to new infrastructure is a daunting task. And although the General Services Administration applied those lessons when it crafted EIS, most agencies are still approaching the transition carefully.

FCW recently gathered a group of IT leaders from across government to discuss their migration plans and the anticipated problems.

The consensus: EIS is a huge opportunity, but it could be tough to carve out the time and ensure the executive buy-in necessary to take full advantage of EIS.

The discussion was on the record but not for individual attribution (see Page 28 for a full list of participants), and the quotes have been edited for length and clarity. Here's what the group had to say.

EIS as a means to an end

IT modernization can be much broader than the EIS contract awards, of course, but the degree to which that is true depends on the agency. Officials from smaller agencies told FCW that the move from Networx to EIS would be the central driver of their modernization efforts — at least in part because the migration is mandatory.

“Everything’s waiting for EIS for us,” one participant said. Although resource constraints have often hamstrung other modernization efforts, the sunset of Networx means sticking with the status quo is not an option. “I quickly realized what we have to do is not just the network but also the strategies, the cloud and the security. We used to have four different plans; now we have one plan. We put the four together, and EIS has really played a central role.”

For some of the larger agencies, however, EIS is a piece of a bigger puzzle.

“I think for us it’s just one of many things, unfortunately,” another participant said. “We’re going through data center consolidation, network convergence, this whole zero-based security construct and standardizing our security stacks. EIS is one of many things. It’s unfortunate those aren’t all synchronized. It’s kind of up to each

agency to synchronize that flow.”

Nevertheless, a third participant said, “I see EIS as an enabler. So I’m really excited about doing it, and we’re looking at ways you can really leverage it and challenge it as well.”

Avoiding the temptation to lift and shift

For EIS to be used as an enabler, however, agencies must first figure out what their future infrastructure should look like — a difficult task for which few participants felt fully prepared. Several voiced concerns that time pressures and lack of interest from senior agency leaders could lead to “like-for-like” upgrades that don’t reflect changing needs.

“For us, the IT modernization is not just the network. It is the cloud option, it is the data center consolidation and all of that,” one participant said. “That’s going to play a factor in what we’re doing from a planning perspective.”

“There’s also the challenge of the timing,” another added. “Our customers haven’t stopped demanding services. It’s not like we have the chance to just step back and retool our systems while our customers wait patiently on the side and say, ‘OK, whenever you get to us, we’ll be happy to take it.’ They’re screaming for the services. I



think every organization is at a different level of maturity, and that's a challenge across the federal government."

Do more with less

For all the different maturity levels, however, one need was nearly universal: Agencies want more and more bandwidth.

"Everything that we want to do right now is going to require a significant amount of bandwidth outside our normal data-center-to-data-center sort of bandwidth," one participant said, adding that the days of annual budget increases to cover that connectivity are over.

EIS should help on that front. One participant said GSA has negotiated prices that are about 21 percent lower than Networx rates for similar services. But others stressed the importance of being strategic in their planning and making sure not everything is supported forever.

"We've all seen technology road maps that just go up and to the right," one executive said. "Everything was at least inflation plus whatever for innovation. So we built our road maps specifically with a big thread of divestment. You want to do something? What are you not going to do? Otherwise, it's always more and more and more, and

no one believes you when you're just a consumer of resources."

Another participant agreed, saying the move to EIS is a perfect opportunity to force those conversations by "placing cliffs in the way" and declaring that an outdated system will no longer be supported.

It's the IT shop's responsibility to provide an acceptable off-ramp and alternative solution, that participant added, but the threat can't be an empty one. "I have turned things off, and that's what scares them the most. That's how the cliff becomes real. All you have to do is turn one thing off and have it matter and then the cliff becomes real."

Participants also lamented the lack of attention to total cost of ownership and said understanding it is essential to making smart decisions about EIS.

"There's not usually a total cost of ownership done properly because that's an afterthought," one said. "I'm talking about what it should cost you not only to buy, build, maintain, but also what does it cost you to retire that system? Part of our challenge with the budget isn't just building all this new stuff and getting all this new stuff in place. How do we eliminate all the old stuff that's out there or somehow



incorporate it into the new stuff in a meaningful way?"

EIS as the ultimate laas?

Although most participants applauded the flexibility and broad range of services that EIS offers, a few pinned for a way to truly outsource their infrastructure needs.

"Here's my wish list for GSA," one said. "I would love if GSA put up a network and cloud security access broker and software-defined storage running on a software-defined wide-area network. Make that available to all small agencies like us. [The Department of Homeland Security] can do the security, and we don't have to worry about that anymore."

GSA is exploring something along

those lines, another participant said. The idea is to use EIS “to organize a service that we can package and small agencies can grab and use. They can either run it themselves or we can assist them.”

Such a bundled service could also appeal to large agencies, another participant said. With EIS’ basic structure, “I’m still dealing with multiple vendors, and I don’t want to deal with multiple vendors. I want one button to push because I’m tired of being a soccer referee like I used to be. I retired from that.”

Speed, scale and shiny objects

By far, the group’s most common concern was whether agencies can move quickly enough to effectively transform their infrastructure before the clock runs out on Networx services.

For most government agencies, one said, fielding new systems takes so long that the next iteration is missed by the time the original deployment is complete. “That’s the challenge: It’s scale and speed,” he said. “That’s why we’d really like to go fast with EIS. It’s probably going to evolve, and if you take more than two or three years to get there, it’s going to be something different.”

“And traditionally the government can’t handle that much inbound work in less than five or six years,” another participant added.

Indeed, GSA officials are concerned about bottlenecks with the initial solicitations. One participant predicted that most agencies will issue theirs by the end of the year, but that surge “is going to be really tough for all those service providers.”

There’s also the challenge of convincing agency leaders that it’s worth the time and investment to truly transform the underlying infrastructure.

“Management likes the shiny object things—the mobile computing, desk-top-to-laptop conversations, picking up

the smartphone,” one participant said.

Although such changes have posed challenges for existing network infrastructure, they also offer an opening to explain the importance of modernization.

“There are a few shiny objects that they actually value,” another participant agreed. “So you can tie it back to that and talk about how important that foundation piece has to be there. Then there can be more conversation, [and] there can be understanding.”

Few expected agency heads to fully engage with the ins and outs of EIS, however. “We’ll never get them fully onboard, to be honest,” that same participant acknowledged.

Making EIS about the mission

Getting executive buy-in is crucial, another executive said, because otherwise IT infrastructure will be an

afterthought. “It’s always measured by the mission. Always. You can have a really crappy IT structure, but if you can get the mission done in a timely development, it doesn’t really matter.”

“If you’re trying to be an enterprise architecture to a mission person, you’re not going to get anywhere,” another participant agreed. “It has to be a mission architecture, not an IT architecture.”

A third participant noted that enterprise architecture, when done right, should capture the business drivers of any agency’s mission. The second participant agreed but warned that the focus can get lost when “there are a bunch of IT geeks on it.”

A fourth participant returned to cost as the key to securing agency executives’ attention. “Mission is No. 1,” he said, “but showing cost savings is 1.000001 right behind it.” ■



Participants

Tony Bardo
Assistant Vice President for Government Solutions, Hughes

David Bennett
Director of Operations and CIO, Defense Information Systems Agency

Gerald Caron
Acting Director for Enterprise Network Management, Bureau of Information Resource Management, Department of State

Michael Fairless
Branch Chief, Servers and Storage Branch, Securities and Exchange Commission

Jeffrey Flick
Director, Enterprise Network Program Office, Office of the CIO, and EIS Lead Transition Manager, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Gregory Garcia
CIO/G-6, Army Corps of Engineers

Dyung Le
Director of Systems Engineering, National Archives and Records Administration

Crystal Philcox
Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Category Management, Office of IT Category, Federal Acquisition Service, General Services Administration

Dan Rasmussen
Senior Vice President, Hughes

Francisco Salguero
Deputy CIO, Department of Agriculture

Note: FCW Editor-in-Chief Troy K. Schneider and 1105 Public Sector Media Group President Anne A. Armstrong led the roundtable discussion. The June 14 gathering was underwritten by Hughes, but both the substance of the discussion and the recap on these pages are strictly editorial products. Neither Hughes nor any of the roundtable participants had input beyond their June 14 comments.

