Update on Defense Cloud Computing from the JIE Mission Partners Symposium

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Recently the professional association AFCEA hosted a major conference at the Baltimore Convention Center on the future of the Defense Department's Joint Information Environment. The JIE, as it's known in acronym land, is a major DoD effort to engineer a common operating environment for the Defense community. This effort currently focuses on two areas: installing new network hardware equipment to boost bandwidth globally and implementing a Single Security Architecture that's easier for the DoD to defend. Improving security is a critical reason for implementing the JIE, but from a fiscal perspective enabling the Defense community to use a host of shared enterprise services via a unified infrastructure is perhaps the most important rationale. Put simply, the DoD cannot afford business as usual given the expense of maintaining countless redundant applications in stovepiped environments.

In this context cloud computing plays an important role in the DoD's plans. Contrary to what one typically reads in the trade press, the DoD has not stood still when it comes to finding ways for Defense customers to employ cloud solutions. Lieutenant General Ronnie Hawkins, Director of the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), set the tone early in the Symposium by blowing up the myth that his agency's development of its own cloud environment, dubbed the milCloud, is an end-run around industry. "[The] reality is," Hawkins noted, "that more than 60% of milCloud is run by industry partners and more than 80% of the Defense Information Systems Network (DISN) is run by industry partners." In making this point, General Hawkins gave voice to something I've argued in this blog for more than a year; namely, that the DoD is making progress using cloud computing largely behind the scenes.

On the second day of the conference, John Hale, Chief of Strategic Planning for Enterprise Services at DISA, provided details on where opportunities in the milCloud might present themselves to cloud service providers. Hale described enterprise services in the milCloud that DISA currently provides, including Defense Enterprise Email, the Defense Enterprise Portal Service, Defense Connect Online, and Enterprise Directory Services. He noted, however, that hosting of these services in the future will not necessarily reside in the DISA's Defense Enterprise Computing Centers (DECCs).

There is the potential of "more outsourcing to commercial partners coming," Hale said; with the goal of making "blended use of enterprise services across the DoD," including both commercial and DoD providers.

The best example of this approach that Hale could provide is DEE, the hosting of which DISA intends to outsource to a commercial provider in the future. Hale said industry should expect a "huge shift" to commercial providers over the next 2-3 years. This shift will take place once current network consolidation efforts are completed to a satisfactory degree and once additional commercial providers receive the Authority to Operate (ATO) from DISA. Lastly, concerning how commercial cloud services will be procured, Hale expects DISA will "use a multi-pronged approach" that leverages a revamped version of the Commercial Cloud Services Provider contract vehicle in tandem with various Blanket Purchase Agreements it awards.

In conclusion, although a little patience might be required, the opportunity looks good in the next few years for cloud service providers to compete for significant business at DISA.