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GOVERNMENT SPECIAL

GET SMART

Technologies that enable the transition to smart government

Raising the bar

The government IT market is one of the largest vertical markets globally, and for good reason. Governments are trying to get smart by being efficient and effective at what they do. Yasser Zeineldin, CEO of eHosting DataFort, gives us a lowdown on some of the key trends in the government sector.

What are the key technology trends affecting the Middle Eastern governments now and in the coming years?

With over 25 million visitors expected to visit Dubai for the World Expo 2020, the event promises to be a major opportunity for business and IT development. In fact, it has opened up a number of avenues which will shape the technology trends in the region for the next few years.

While the city is already witnessing smart infrastructure being built based on the latest and cutting edge technology, the government now aspires to transform the Emirate into a smart city within the next three years. This would ensure better efficiency and an enhanced working environment for the tourists, international investors and new businesses during the Expo.

The announcement to transform the region into a smart city was made in 2013, leading to a boom in the technology sector. With the huge number of tourists and investors coming to the UAE, there will be a large influx of data, which will need greater infrastructure planning. Businesses will have to manage this large amount of information in the most organized way. To ensure the same, investing in additional storage and network capacity would be required.

The Qatar World Cup 2022 will open up similar avenues, as governments and companies continue to invest in IT solutions for smart city infrastructure development, effective data storage and backup systems.

There is also a push towards greater mobile enablement of government services which will further increase self-service utilization. Smartphones and tablets are becoming the key contact

point between citizens and government institutions. With the increased focus on mobility, there will be a positive impact on ICT spending especially in the areas of mobile security, CRM, geo-localisation software, mobile enterprise management (covering solutions for device management, application development, and application management), and mobile content management, among others.

All of this requires a strong backbone IT infrastructure which is secure and scalable. Hence, we will see increased investment in data centre hosting services and cloud infrastructure as a service which offers scalable infrastructure on demand at low operational costs enabling faster adoption of online and mobile services.

Maintaining the highest levels of IT security and ensuring relevant compliance and regulatory demands have become imperative technology requirements. Ensuring the availability of IT systems in case of any disaster is also becoming a key reason for investments in Disaster recovery and Business continuity. In fact, we are seeing a lot of demand for disaster recovery services from the government sector.

In summary I believe that the advancement of technology will take a new meaning in the near future as the UAE aims to transform into a major technological hub not just within the region, but at a global level.

How do you rate the level of innovation in the government vertical compared to others in the region?
According to the Global Information Technology Report 2013, the UAE occupied the 25th position on the Network Readiness Index (NRI), achieving a rank of 5.07 out of 7. Aligning with the government's economic diversification goals, there has been considerable deployment of ICT solutions within all segments and industries. The country's e-government services rank 9th globally, and the increased uptake of mobile broadband subscription (49th) are responsible for the UAE's upward mobility on this index. The nation's enterprises have increased ICT spending in the areas of internet bandwidth and skills upgrading.

The UAE government verticals occupy a favourable position ahead of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, ranking 29th, 31st and 62nd respectively on the NRI.

According to the same report, Qatar remains competitive on the forefront of technological innovation in the region. The Qatari government has steadily increased online services and solutions for the citizens over the last year, and has also garnered significant online participation from them. ICT verticals such as mobile broadband subscriptions have skyrocketed from 9.6 per cent in 2012 to 70.3 per cent in 2013.

Some verticals, however, continue to lag behind. The ICT investment within the oil and gas sector, for instance, occupies only 10.71 per cent of total ICT spending in the GCC region, whereas telecommunications (19.30 per cent) and banking and finance (14.83 per cent) have been quicker to adopt cutting-edge technology solutions. The array of innovations within tablets will cause the IT hardware growth to reduce by 1.5 per cent in 2014. Mobility appears to be the key focus in the UAE, with enterprises and businesses adopting Bring-Your-Own-Devices (BYOD), machine-to-machine, unified communications, and software-defined data centres in 2014.

The UAE government remains committed to expanding ICT expertise and sophistication in the GCC as a method of economic diversification and developing entrepreneurship.

Yasser Zeineldin, CEO of eHosting DataFort

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What kind of new technologies are transforming the way government enterprises and citizens interact with each other?

There are various innovations that are transforming the IT landscape today - some examples include cloud computing, data centres, BYOD, personal clouds, and cloud integration mechanisms. Among these, cloud computing is the dominant technology which shapes the data and communication sphere for governments, enterprises and citizens. Due to the abundance of devices, making a shift to the cloud is necessary to integrate critical IT functions and enhance connectivity between people.

The regional government aims to adopt solutions for smart city development. The above technologies help integrate key transport and infrastructure systems, utilities, e-government services within aviation and immigration, healthcare and many more. Additionally, the creation of apps has facilitated the communication between governments and citizens on all these fronts.

These new technologies will not only help governments facilitate their internal operations, but will accelerate the pace of smart city development and adoption of government services online and on mobile devices.

We have seen a lot of interest from governments on hosting critical collaboration portals and other online portals on a virtualized / cloud platform. As an example, eHDF has deployed a fully managed hosting environment for the UAE Ministry of Public Works' e-project portal. This enables all departments within the ministry as well as external contractors to view the entire project lifecycle in real time and ensures highly confidential tender and contracts data is safeguarded against any threats.

Are government entities looking at the managed services models to reduce costs and opex? What is driving the adoption?

Yes, government entities are looking at managed service models which are cost-efficient, reducing their overall IT spending in the long-run. Managed IT Services offer multiple benefits at a strategic, operational and financial level. In a 2012 study conducted by Frost &Sullivan, it was reported that the UAE's overall managed services market would grow at a compound annual growth rate of 17% over the next five years.

The Government is spending a large amount on IT infrastructure development and a significant portion of that is being outsourced. Data center hosting firms are the backbone of this model and government entities are taking advantage of such services for quick deployment of IT resources, shared resource usage and Service level agreements (SLAs).

Managed Hosting Services offer customized services with the promise of 24/7 availability and support, thereby allowing governments to focus on their core operations. They are turning to managed service models to complement their in-house IT infrastructure management.

eHDF, being a managed hosting and cloud infrastructure services provider, offers an array of managed services that enable government entities to outsource some or all of their IT infrastructure management. This includes servers, networks, storage, back-up and security, monitoring, etc which are all backed by SLAs required for high availability, reliability, security and redundancy.

What is your value proposition to the government sector here?

eHDF has been in the managed hosting business since 2001 and is one of the oldest commercial Data Centre and Managed Hosting service providers in the region. Additionally, being a part of TECOM Investments (a member of Dubai Holding) our business has adequate backing and support to compete and thrive in the market.

Our work with the government sector over the years reflects their trust in our services and solutions. We have implemented complex and innovative cloud computing, managed services and disaster recovery projects for both government and private sector organizations. These implementations have attracted a number of highly esteemed and reputed clients in the government sector such as Dubai e-Government, Emirates e-Government and Ministry of Public Works to name a few.

Hosting in a data centre within the borders of the country to meet regulatory compliance requirements is a key concern for government entities and since our data centres are located in Dubai a lot of government entities prefer to work with us. Security of highly confidential citizen data and information is critical. We are certified for ISO 9001, ISO 14001, ISO 18001, ISO 20001, ISO 27001 and BS 25999 certifications and our data centres meet all the security requirements for a Tier 3 data centre. eHDF's 24/7 customer service and bi-lingual customer support team make us a preferred provider for enterprises and governments looking for managed services.

In addition, we also offer Private Cloud services which are highly secure and scalable, offering Government entities a fully managed Virtual Data Centre environment with a shared pool of compute capacity, storage and network. We have developed multiple options comprising of various configurations both managed and unmanaged. We believe this will help realize the potential of cloud computing and help reduce the total cost of ownership of IT assets

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