HEADING TOWARDS THE CLOUD

Key regional customers want their cloud infrastructure providers to be based in the region, according to eHDF's Yasser Zeineldin.

EHOSTING DATAFORT CEO YASSER ZEINELDIN SAYS CUSTOMERS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO ITS HOSTING AND MANAGED IT SERVICES AS THE REGION EMBRACES CLOUD COMPUTING

BY MARK SUTTON

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A s the cloud computing business gradually begins to take shape in the Middle East, it looks like the early leaders in the sector will be the companies that are already in the business of taking care of other people's IT. As an established hosting and managed services provider, eHosting DataFort (eHDF), a fully-owned subsidiary of TECOM Investments, already has customers that trust it to manage their data, and CEO Yasser Zeineldin says that the company is now ready to push out cloud services. eHDF plans to launch its cloud services fully for the region by the second half of this year, Zeineldin says, and its experience with enterprises and services in the region will shape the solutions it brings to market.

The company will kick off with two flavours of cloud, managed private clouds, mainly for enterprise customers, and light public cloud, which will extend eHDF's focus to the SME.

"By studying the UAE market, we found that major enterprise clients do not like the concept of a cloud that is foreign, because of the data security issues, service level issues with a foreign provider, and some of the legal requirements, says Zeineldin. "They prefer to have a local cloud environment; and they don't want to share with other people, but they want to get the benefits of scalability, without the disadvantages or compromises on security and data integrity and so forth."

The company has a small number of clients at the design stage for managed private cloud, and is already offering hosted virtualised hardware, but these deployments require a close design process, to balance delivering the benefits of the cloud with the reluctance to share infrastructure.

"There is a trade off, between how much privacy you would like to have and your unique set up, and how much you want to share with others," says Zeineldin. "If the customer wants a very elastic demand, that can scale ten times, and wants a private cloud, then who pays for that infrastructure? We have the benefit in engaging with the customer in designing a solution that doesn't compromise their requirements, but also that is at a good price point."

"WE ARE SEEING A LOT OF TRACTION IN THE BUSINESS CONTINUITY AND DISASTER RECOVERY SIDE; IT IS TYPICAL TO HAVE A DR CAPABILITY IF YOU ARE RUNNING A MISSION CRITICAL ENVIRONMENT."

Typically some elements of the managed cloud will be kept for the sole use of the client, while other elements of infrastructure can be shared, such as SAN storage or additional computing resources can be provisioned as required.

For the public cloud offering, eHDF will also need to tailor the service to meet legal and regulatory requirements of the UAE. The service is intended to be similar to large international public cloud providers such as Amazon, with hourly billing, easy scalability and rapid provisioning.

Zeineldin says the service should appeal to any company that has an elastic demand for computing power, across a range of industries, and he believes that will also offer companies a convenient way to test out cloud computing.

"There is a misconception that a business needs to go full swing either to cloud computing or inhouse, but the reality is that as the CIO or manager of a line of business, you might have a new workload that you want to automate. You can take a different approach for each workload, and because of either time or financial constraints, you can go for a cloud model for it, as opposed to having set it up internally. That is a good way for many companies to test the concept before making major decisions in cloud computing," he says.

eHDF is actually already providing cloud services for government users in the UAE, through its partnership with Emirates eGovernment. The company manages the shared e-government

EHDF: SKILLS AND SERVICES

CORE SERVICES
• Co Managed Hosting Services
• Co-location Services
• Disaster Recovery & Business Continuity
• Consulting & Advisory Services
• Remote Managed Security Services
• Dedicated Server Packages

QUALITY STANDARDS
• ISO 9001
• Environment Management System: ISO 14001
• Health and Safety Standard: ISO 18001
• IT Service Management (ITSM): ISO 20000
• Information Security Management Systems (ISMS): ISO 27001
• Business Continuity Management: BS 25999
• ITIL v3

Founded in 2001
Fully owned subsidiary of TECOM Investments
(member of Dubai Holding)

platform which delivers services to federal government entities. The platform operates as a community cloud, with a wide menu of services available to help government groups to easily provision new services.

In many ways, promoting the value of the cloud is an extension of what Zeineldin set out to achieve since taking the lead at eHDF in May 2009, in terms of steering customer perception and creating confidence in the company as a local operator.

"I wanted to make sure that the value perception in the minds of customers was pretty clear, so one of the things we have done in that respect is articulate our vision in helping customers, which basically stands on three areas - the strategic benefit of managed hosting or managed services, demonstrating that to clients, how they can focus on their core business, how they can have a faster time to market, to be more agile and so forth. The

second part is the financial benefit, which is basically lowering the TCO, and converting CAPEX-based model to OPEX-based model, and the third is the operational part, which is basically about service excellence, 24x7 support, by [eHDF] having the skills sets and capabilities available."

In order to support the value proposition, Zeineldin says, it was then necessary to examine all aspects of the offering to customers, to make sure that eHDF could "walk the walk" and deliver the value that it was promising.

"On the product and service offering, we had to make sure that our customer satisfaction and delivery time was much shortened, in terms of price and value for money. We also had to revise our pricing structure to make sure that we are not only competitive with the local market, but according to international benchmarks. In terms of service delivery capabilities we accepted

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nothing less than international standards, so we follow ITIL, ISO 9001, ISO 27001, IT service management, security management, the business continuity standard, the BS25999-2. The message we tried to give to the market is you really don't need to go outside to get the same quality of service that you would get with a western European or a North American provider," he explains.

Qualifying for standards has helped eHDF to prove its service excellence, Zeineldin says, and builds customer confidence, although not all customers are aware of all standards. What is important is that they ask the right questions of eHDF, he says, so that they can understand the company's capabilities.

"We try, with the help of the media, to educate the market on the benefit of doing that. It is not just standards for the sake of standards, but it is to ensure a certain level of excellence is being delivered. [Customers] basically enquire how we handle change management, configuration management, escalation, what controls do we have in place for security. Being comfortable with these, and being able to demonstrate them in action, really makes a big difference for clients," he says.

In terms of customers, the company has attracted a number of big names, including Dubai World Trade Centre, Dubai Airport Free Zone Authority, The Atlantis The Palm Resort, Madar Holding and Jumeirah Group. Demand for services has increased so much that the company is now opening a second data centre. The new facility, in the UAE, will deliver another 12,000 square feet, 1.4MW of capacity to add to its existing 11,000 square foot, 2MW capacity.

In terms of the business mix, Zeineldin says that he expects demand for cloud services to take off gradually, mainly in infrastructure-as-a-service and managed private cloud, but for now, fully managed services are the biggest part of its business, although other areas are ramping up.

"We are seeing a lot of traction in the business continuity and disaster recovery side, a number of clients have opted for that in the last couple of years, probably driven by the Arab Spring, and the need to proactively plan for disruption of services," he says. "It is not all related to political unrest, it can be IT related issues, for example the Dubai Airport Free Zone Authority, Dubai World Trade Centre and Atlantis The Palm have all opted for disaster recovery sites with us. It is typical to have a DR capability if you are running a mission critical environment."

eHDF has developed its disaster recovery and business continuity management (BCM) capabilities, qualifying for the British Standard 25999 certification last year, and it has partnered with BCM consultancy CORE, to deliver more holistic BCM practices to its customers.

"The awareness and need for both BCM and DR has definitely increased in the minds of senior management. However, the maturity of BCM and DR readiness still needs to improve," he adds.

The company is also planning a push on remote managed security services, to help companies handle the increasingly complex demands of security. The security services were initially envisioned as an additional service for hosted clients, but eHDF is also offering them remotely to companies that are not hosted clients, but would still like the improved level of security without having to invest in their own skill sets. ∎