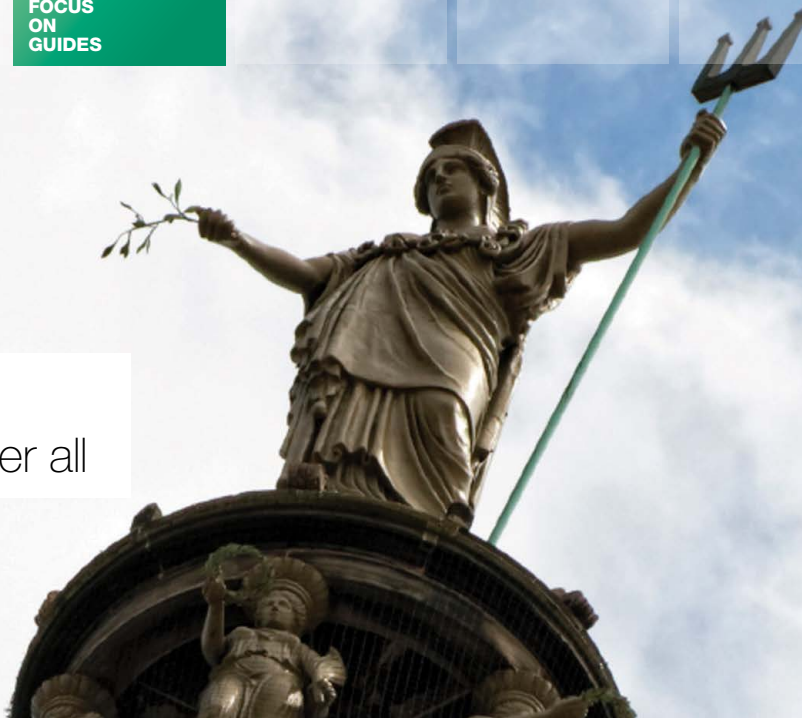


CLOUD

The G-Cloud
– one Cloud to rule over all

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At a time of already turbulent upheaval, the G-Cloud is potentially the most radical shift in public sector ICT service delivery in the UK. The concept was first floated under the former Labour administration, in which guise it was centralist in structure, highly ambitious in reach and potentially hugely expensive.

With the arrival of the Coalition and the Age of Austerity, 'big ticket' programmes like Labour's G-Cloud vision were no longer acceptable and for a time the G-Cloud went on the back burner, not even appearing beyond a couple of mentions in the National ICT Strategy published in early 2011.

But Cloud is just too good an idea for the public sector for the G-Cloud to be down and out for good. The precedent had been set in the US where the Obama administration's 'Cloud First' policy is revolutionising the country's spending on ICT and the effectiveness of its delivery of citizen-facing services.

So as 2011 drew to a close the Cabinet Office took the wraps off a revised and somewhat scaled down G-Cloud strategy – scaled down, but no less ambitious in its aims which state that by December 2015 50% of central government new ICT spending will be transitioned to public Cloud Computing services. By anyone's standards that's a radical transformation.

But it's one that is commendably realistic in its expectations. One criticism that might be levelled at the Obama Cloud push is that it was initially couched in too much idealism – it hinted too strongly at the 'Silver Bullet' and alienated Federal Government CIOs into resistance in the process.

In contrast, the Cabinet Office G-Cloud strategy document is at pains to scale down over-excited expectations: "Government Cloud is not a single, government owned, entity; it is an on-going and iterative programme of work which will enable the use of a range of Cloud services, and changes in the way we procure and operate ICT, throughout the public sector."

Perhaps its most grounded statement is this welcome recognition: "Simply buying Cloud technology will not, in itself,

save the most money. The greatest value will be gained by Government changing the way we buy and operate our ICT... In achieving this we face challenges in procurement, transition and operational arrangements."

To that end, the government concedes that it needs to change the existing procurement rules which inhibit SMEs from participating in bidding for public sector work and have led to the situation where the vast majority of UK government ICT work rests with 6 major suppliers.

For their part, SMEs are likely to be particularly drawn to the creation of a government App Store that will enable them to tout their services to government more easily. Indeed before Christmas 2011 the government had to extend the deadline for submissions to its G-Cloud Framework after an unexpectedly enthusiastic rush of entries by SMEs.

The G-Cloud is set to kick down a lot of barriers to entry it seems. This desire for SME inclusion is an area in which traditional outsourcing firms are likely to feel an impact as they are compelled to partner with smaller firms in Cloud ecosystems in order to win business. 'Playing nicely' is going to become a tick-box issue during procurement processes.

Of course all this depends on the public sector buy-side buying into the vision. While local government ICT association Socitm has declared that Cloud, not outsourcing, is the way ahead, there will still be scepticism and plain old FUD* at ground level to overcome on the way to the Cloud.

G-Cloud Programme Director Chris Chant admits that only 20% of public sector ICT decision makers are "ready to go" while 60% are still on the fence. "There's still 20% that aren't interested, however," he said. "We know some will have to be dragged kicking and screaming – and they probably will be."

Whether by carrot or by stick, Cloud is coming to the public sector in a big way.

Visit www.businesscloud9.com for more articles on Cloud from Stuart Lauchlan.

* Fear, uncertainty and doubt