FEATURE

IHS Markit makes bold bet on public cloud during the pandemic

Despite uncertainty brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, IHS Markit stuck with its strategy to move compute resources to AWS. IHS CIO Chad Moss offers tips for IT leaders making similar migrations.

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As the coronavirus forced businesses to close in March, IHS Markit faced a difficult decision. The company, which provides data analytics services, had hoped to offload the bulk of its compute functions to the public cloud beginning in 2020, but the pandemic raised key questions.

Would the tech team be able to execute its cloud migration while helping 16,000 employees transition to remote work? Would an enterprise-scale cloud migration even be wise after CEO Lance Uggla decided the company should manage a downside scenario and work feverishly to take cost out of the business?

IHS leadership decided the business and tech teams, working in concert, could pull it off, says CIO Chad Moss, whose organization helped with the migration. "It was a big bold decision," Moss tells CIO.com.

The decision stands out as ambitious at a time when most organizations are postponing new projects and re-evaluating ongoing projects against their time to cash and value. Yet while companies are cutting costs and hoarding cash, spending on all manner of cloud software continues to soar, says Gartner analyst John-David Lovelock. Recent earnings results from Amazon, Microsoft and Google back this position, with the three vendors reporting boosts in cloud revenues.

Finding clarity in the cloud

IHS was on the cusp of making a decision about its cloud strategy when the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the U.S. Thanks to several acquisitions, IHS products ran on a variety of stacks and operating models, with some operating in public cloud services from Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure and Google Cloud Platform and others running on premises, including in VMware virtual machines.

But there was no singular strategic initiative, which is critical for a company transitioning to DevSecOps and product-based management models, Moss recalls.

That changed about 18 months ago, when IHS established an office of the CTO as a governing body to put together a cohesive cloud strategy, with the goal of standardizing on a single cloud platform to streamline operations. This office, led by CTO Yaacov Mutnikas, would serve as the glue between IHS' product teams across its various business lines. "That put us into position to have strong alignment between tech and the business across the firm," Moss says.

When the outbreak hit, IHS executives, already busy with enabling teams to transition to work from home, convened via video call for several discussions about its cloud strategy. They raised several questions, though they ultimately came back to the critical ask: Should they execute on the plan or hold off given

future uncertainty?

Eager to realize the operational efficiencies associated with standardizing on one platform, IHS decided to move forward and standardize on AWS.

IHS, which already runs several analytics products in AWS, is moving the majority of its storage, corporate platforms and end user applications. It expects to tap AWS machine learning and data processing expertise to more rapidly mine insights and refine its products. The company is also leveraging VMware Cloud on AWS, which will enable it to use the same VMware technologies to manage its on-premises data center environments and its AWS infrastructure without refactoring apps, Moss says.

Since inking the contract in April, IHS has migrated more than 30 percent of its workloads to AWS, says Moss.

Tips for a successful cloud move

Moss says CIOs who elect to migrate to the cloud during the pandemic would do well to follow a few best practices.

Establish a central command. Whether you call it an office of the CTO or a cloud center of excellence, installing a central governing body to oversee cloud strategy is essential, says Moss, adding that IHS struggled to facilitate its cloud strategy before the office was created. "The establishment of the office of the CTO brought tech and business leaders together," Moss says. This in turn enabled IHS to align on business outcomes. He also credits CEO Uggla with giving IHS the opportunity to accelerate its move to the cloud even as travel and other business expenses have been scaled back.

Pick the right partner. Figuring out the best vendor with which to make a multi-year transition is a crucial decision. That means making sure it's a partner the business is willing to sponsor and execute with, Moss says. Aligning on a partner is as important as aligning on the tech implementation. "AWS was a great partner and they got us into position to where we were comfortable moving forward," Moss says.

At IHS, for example, product owners are central to this decision making, so the move to AWS was viewed as a business decision rather than as an IT or tech product initiative. "The virtues of the cloud are understood and supported," Moss says.

Communicate regularly. Twice a week, business and IT convene as a steering committee to discuss the migration. Senior execs meet monthly to discuss whether progress is delivering on outcomes. "One of our core principles is hypertransparency," Moss says. If an issue comes up, the team address it quickly so that it doesn't fester. The improved collaboration gives IHS the ability to execute with confidence, Moss says.