

What agencies need to get up to speed

on EIS, Alliant 2 and other contract
vehicles that enable modernization

With GSA deadlines and the end of Fiscal 2020 closing in, agencies need to focus on transformation, not just transition.



Introduction

Federal agencies are facing several tight deadlines as they transition their information technology services to new contracts, such as the General Services Administration's Enterprise Infrastructure Solutions (EIS) contract. Moreover, they are embarking on this transition while continuing to deal with the impact of a global pandemic and preparing for the approaching end of the federal fiscal year on Sept. 30.

Agencies that have been slower to prepare for contract transition will be faced with different obstacles and challenges — and could likely use some hands-on guidance when it comes to making the switch. In the case of EIS, GSA has established deadlines for completing the move to the new contract. With Alliant 2, agencies need a strategy to ensure the use of the contract to their biggest advantage. But how can agencies actually make that happen?



The path to modernization

The advantages of the new contracts are clear; with the largest advantage being price. The same services on EIS are projected to cost agencies less than they would on Networkx or other legacy contracts. Furthermore, the EIS contract structure itself is more flexible and can better support agencies' unique needs and requirements for modern end-to-end solutions as opposed to using pre-defined product sets, which can be rigid.

Both EIS and Alliant 2 were built to support agency modernization efforts: EIS through services such as cloud migration, enhanced mobility, added cybersecurity and the greater use of automation and upgraded digital networking solutions; and Alliant 2 through technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotic process automation (RPA) and distributed ledger technology (DLT).

But the transition is complex and can be somewhat confusing for agencies. "We would prefer to use the word transform, not just transition," said Scott Barnett, vice president of Lumen's Department of Defense practice. But that involves agencies changing their approach to contracting. "The Networkx contract was very compartmentalized by product," Barnett said. Agencies went to one vendor for private line services, another for internet connectivity and an additional vendor for voice services. "The beauty of EIS is that it is more solution based, so if you're using EIS, you should be able to get full solution sets."

Faced with time constraints and other challenges, however, some agencies have been resorting to like-for-like requests. "That's exactly what we're nervous about," Barnett said, "a part-for-part, dollar-for-dollar transitioning from one contract vehicle to the other that does not enable transformation." EIS should enable the transformation, but only if agencies approach it the right way.

Some agencies may be slow to embrace EIS because of the comfort level they have with the previous contracts, such as WITS. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic — with offices closed down and work being done remotely — has also impacted contracting work in general. “But the pandemic has also created an environment that shows government agencies the true benefits of modernization,” Barnett notes. “Agencies with flexible, adaptive infrastructures have been able to easily adjust to the new working environment.”

Agencies in a bind over the convergence of roadblocks could benefit from an industry partner with experience in navigating the contracting landscape and making the best use of the great opportunities the new contracts provide.

Three key steps to get started

In order to take full advantage of EIS and its ability to contribute to federal IT Modernization efforts, agencies should look to take several key steps when beginning their journey:

Know where you're going.

Build on that inventory to identify future telecommunications needs, particularly with regard to modernization efforts. This can help agencies think in terms of solutions rather than products.

Know what you have.

Agencies should do a complete inventory of their current telecommunications assets and services, including details of maintaining those resources.

Plan for transition.

Agency leadership should clearly establish roles for managing the transition, including defining responsibilities for managing assets and human capital.

The promise

Moving to new contracts may be difficult, but the payoff could be great for agencies, not only in their day-to-day operations but also in helping them to avoid being overwhelmed by crises such as COVID-19. EIS takes a consumption-based pricing approach that enhances the switch from a CapEx model to an Op-Ex model. This lowers hardware and infrastructure costs while “future-proofing” networks by enabling them to quickly scale and making upgrades to new technologies more seamless.

Alliant 2 is one of GSA's most flexible contracts and is specifically designed to enable IT modernization. Both EIS and Alliant 2 focus on providing full, end-to-end solutions as opposed to merely selling pieces of the IT services pie.

Rather than, simply moving to Ethernet, which is a building block for modernization, agencies can acquire a software-defined wide-area network (SD-WAN) solution under EIS, which would allow them to adopt a Zero-Trust Networking model of identify management. In the case of the COVID-19 response, Zero-Trust Networking could significantly improve security for telework operations.



Trusted resources and partners

GSA offers a variety of transition resources, as well as other information on its EIS web page, including a dashboard that tracks agencies' transition progress. GAO's recent report also offered recommendations to specific agencies that might serve as a reference point for others. In addition to these, agencies can benefit from an industry provider that has first-hand experience with navigating the transition of networking or IT solutions from expiring contracts to new vehicles. EIS and Alliant 2, after all, were created with significant input from industry through development and release.

Lumen has an extensive track record of working with government agencies and federal contract vehicles. For example, Lumen was the first EIS supplier to receive Authority to Operate in March 2019, and a month later, the company won the very first task order awarded under EIS. Agencies that are behind in moving to EIS need to approach the new contract as a vehicle for transformation, said Lumen's Senior Director for Government Strategy Meg Coker. This is particularly important in terms of readiness, so that "when something like COVID-19 comes along, you're able to easily adapt," she said.

A transformed approach to contracting, however, "enables them to build out, build through the stack and enable more of those technologies that support telework and can get them into the cloud environment more quickly," she adds.

Agencies that have been slow to embrace EIS should look for guidance on moving forward, not only on how to transition to the new contract vehicles but also how to use them to the best benefit.

"We really do believe that transformation is what's in the best interest of the agency and the public," Coker said.

The next steps for agencies

Indeed, agencies have plenty of reasons to take advantage of the opportunities of EIS and Alliant 2. These contract vehicles allow public sector organizations to fulfill the goals of the Modernizing Government Technology Act by improving services and productivity, as well as employing technologies such as big data, analytics, AI, cloud infrastructure, automation and improved security. There's also the bottom line: The longer agencies wait to move to the new contracts, the more they miss out on the cost savings built into them.

It's never been more crucial to move quickly. GAO says it's "critical that agencies conduct early planning with the information available and fully implement these transition planning practices," to avoid the kinds of delays that hurt the Networx transition. Agencies need to take inventory, analyze their future needs, establish a management structure, identify the resources they require and develop a detailed transition plan. Easier said than done, of course, which is where a third-party partnership can make the difference.

The Modernization Act, like every effort to improve IT operations, emphasizes the importance of collaboration with industry. Ensuring your agency is making the best use of EIS and Alliant 2 should be part of that collaboration. A trusted partner like Lumen can help agencies devise a feasible transformation plan and manage IT modernization projects effectively. As the end of fiscal 2020 approaches, agencies can kickstart their efforts by working with a partner like Lumen to develop an appropriate statement of work.

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