To Accelerate Growth, Take A 'Minimum Viable' Approach

An Interview with Stretto CTO George Tsounis by Katie Kuehner-Hebert of StrategicCIO360

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Mid-sized companies will benefit from thoughtful, incremental technology steps, says George Tsounis, CTO of Stretto.

When it comes to accelerating growth for mid-sized organizations, longtime IT veteran George Tsounis finds it best to leverage a "minimum viable" enterprise architecture strategy.

Tsounis is chief technology officer at Stretto, an Irvine, California-based bankruptcy services and technology firm serving the corporate and consumer bankruptcy sectors, as well as professional fiduciaries. He spoke with StrategicCIO360 about moving to the cloud, when you really need to partner with your CFO and the advantages of a "sandbox environment" for your engineers.

What technology strategies have you successfully leveraged to accelerate growth for mid-sized organizations in your career?

In my technology leadership roles within mid-sized organizations, I've leveraged a "minimum viable" enterprise architecture (EA) strategy. This approach is about establishing a three-way balance between the company's resources, the minimum architecture required to achieve a business outcome and taking a step toward the long-term strategic enterprise architecture.

I believe the most practical approach is to first understand the strategic business objectives. These objectives should be evaluated in conjunction with the current best technology practices to create a high-level EA vision. Once an EA vision is in place, the current application portfolio can be assessed and compared to the future state. A technology roadmap can then be created to support the business objectives in order of priority.

The primary benefit of taking a minimum viable EA approach is the ability to provide technology solutions that support growth or an internal optimization objective "just in time." With each solution in the roadmap, a step is taken to get closer to the long-range high-level EA vision. As an organization progresses closer to its long-range EA vision, it can achieve acceleration of delivery, optimized costs, efficiency improvements, innovation and the ability to respond more quickly to external threats or opportunities.

Could you share some insights on the data center aspects of the technology strategy? What is your view on on-premise, hybrid-cloud or a full cloud deployment for mid-sized organizations?

I've found that the full-cloud deployment model is best for mid-sized organizations. Every organization is different, however this model should be the first choice unless there are compliance or business requirements that don't allow for it. It's best to focus resources on strategic systems that are core to the business rather than a commodity such as operating a data center.

The cost of running your systems and applications in a cloud provider is an important consideration. Each provider has incentive programs and enterprise agreements with discounts that significantly reduce the cost. Organizations should request bids from various providers and encourage them to "fight" for your business.

I recommend partnering with your CFO when evaluating the cost of a transition from an on-premise deployment to a cloud-based deployment. On-premise deployment is typically heavy on capital purchases whereas a cloud-based deployment is operating-expense heavy. Most providers offer a no-cost migration assessment that can be used to compare current and post-migration costs.

In looking at a company's competitive landscape, you'll likely see many other companies leveraging cloud technologies. Competitors may use cloud services to accelerate their businesses, so it's important to adopt a robust cloud strategy to remain ahead of the curve.

It's common to find outdated mission-critical platforms or applications that aren't well-positioned for growing the organization. What strategies have you leveraged to address this challenge?

Many mission-critical applications are custom-built for specific business purposes. Too often, these applications are built on older technologies that are not properly documented, and over time, the code base evolved into a large monolith.

Enhancing outdated applications can be costly and the lack of institutional expertise can result in quality control issues due to unanticipated impacts. "Big bang" or wholesale rewrites of legacy applications are rarely successful. These are large complex efforts that don't provide business value until they are completed. I've found a more incremental approach to modernize a company's technology by decomposing the larger application and isolating the modernization effort to one domain at a time is a more effective solution. With this systematic approach, technology teams can strike the best balance between delivering short-term business value while updating the strategic application to current technologies.

I believe the new architecture should be based on existing industry-standard design patterns, and the solution should be built on available cloud services. This approach leverages existing technology, speeds up implementation and reduces quality issues as the cloud services utilized are fully tested and proven.

What are some key considerations and pitfalls to look out for when using cloud-native technologies to modernize a mission-critical platform or application?

Ensuring your architecture is loosely coupled from the cloud provider's proprietary services you are leveraging is key. Companies utilizing cloud services to accelerate innovation or modernization initiatives run the risk of getting too embedded with one cloud provider. Technology departments not only have more flexibility by keeping the architecture loosely coupled, but they also reduce overall costs if they decide to look into another cloud provider's solution.

It's critical to provide training to your team. Some cloud providers have extensive, free online training as well as highly discounted training programs. Empower your teams to apply concepts learned in their training on smaller projects. I also

recommend that the engineers are provided a “sandbox” environment that they can use to experiment with cloud services.

It’s also important to develop a deep relationship with the selected cloud provider. Teams should leverage any available solution-architecture experts and engage the cloud provider for guidance and input on your company’s specific roadmap and solutions. This type of free assistance is usually available when you are in an enterprise agreement with a cloud provider.