Government agencies are under unprecedented pressure to cut costs and improve agility. Austerity measures, during these tough economic times, are forcing state agencies to find new ways to reduce their budget deficits and address mounting debts. At the same time, state agencies are being asked to provide flexible services faster while ensuring greater transparency and top-notch customer service.

Not surprisingly, savvy government agencies are turning to cloud computing. In fact, according to a September 2013 Center for Digital Government (CDG) survey, "Cloud Adoption and Procurement Practices," 46 percent of respondents indicate their jurisdiction has implemented or is planning to implement a cloud offering. By putting key applications and services in the cloud, state agencies are discovering new and cost-effective ways to provide citizens with secure access to information and achieve significant business value with minimal capital investment.

In addition, state agencies must also meet the growing demands of a more mobile workforce. In fact, 46 percent of survey respondents have or will conduct an assessment to go mobile or support BYOD policies. And one in five respondents listed accommodating a mobile workforce as their No. 1 priority. By delivering key services straight to citizens’ smartphones and tablets, cloud technology promises to help state agencies leverage mobility for the sake of citizen engagement.

But as cloud computing grows in popularity, the vendor landscape is becoming an increasingly confusing place. To be sure, the right partnership can deliver huge savings and efficiency gains. Consider, for example, the Western States Contracting Alliance (WSCA), which recently selected Unisys, in partnership with Amazon Web Services (AWS), to provide cloud implementation and hosting services to state agencies. As part of its cloud hosting initiative, WSCA’s participating states will be able to leverage innovative contracting vehicles to more rapidly migrate to the cloud while slashing administrative costs and bolstering access to quality products and services.

So how can a state agency select the best vendor for its cloud undertaking? Here are the top 5 things government CIOs need to look for in a vendor for maximum savings, cost efficiencies and real business value.

1. Technology neutral.

There’s no such thing as a cookie-cutter approach to cloud computing. For some applications and websites, the AWS public cloud provides the perfect combination of cost effectiveness and scalability. But in other instances, where there are increased compliance requirements such as for the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) or Payment Card Industry (PCI), utilizing the AWS public cloud or hybrid IT with on-premises infrastructure can make it easier to audit and comply.

The key is an effective plan. Taking an inventory of all applications and using a tool-based approach to assess which ones need to be moved to a more modern IT environment is essential. There are an array of services available to help make these decisions.

Establishing a flexible and scalable plan is especially beneficial to agencies that are considering shared services agreements. In fact, 81 percent of survey respondents planning or considering shared services agreements for cloud services cite a vendor’s technology independence or neutrality as very important. That’s because a technology neutral vendor can ensure that a state agency’s choice of cloud model isn’t based on a vendor’s preference but rather on the agency’s core attributes, system requirements and desired service levels.

2. An ecosystem supporter.

It’s not enough for state agencies to select cloud solutions based solely on cost considerations. To be sure, the right cloud model can reduce spending on technology infrastructure and cut capital costs. But a cloud computing vendor should also support an ecosystem
of multi-vendor offerings to ensure the proper planning, design and implementation of a cloud.

For example, as part of the WSCA cloud contract, participating entities can choose to utilize Unisys’ Enterprise Broker Service (EBS), which provides a single dashboard for the provisioning and management of multiple leading public and private technology infrastructures. This service enables the execution of a technology-neutral approach, a better mapping of applications to the most suitable cloud provider, and because applications and data are not hosted on a single cloud technology, EBS also erases fears of single vendor lock in.

With this ecosystem in place, the right partner can guide an agency through the process of determining what applications belong in the cloud, cloud type and scope; and the requirements that must be met to deliver maximum uptime at an optimal price point. The result is a balanced cloud portfolio that carefully parses out workloads among infrastructures while maintaining a single view through a common service catalog and seamless management interface.

3. The ability to customize.
To make the most of cloud technology, state agencies need to be able to aggregate and customize basic cloud services to meet their unique requirements. For example, a state agency may wish to procure a set amount of capacity for a particular period of time. However, a less rigid agency may prefer to buy cloud capacity on demand or to schedule usage for off hours. Whatever the case, customization enables a state agency to derive greater efficiency and value from its cloud model.

In fact, many agencies turn to vendors such as Unisys to build cloud brokerage programs in order to uniquely integrate and customize disparate cloud services for specific agency requirements. Advisory services, cloud design and implementation are tools that can also be customized so that agencies benefit from the agility, flexibility and economics of cloud computing.

4. A secure solution.
The need to guarantee the safety and confidentiality of network data is growing exponentially among state agencies. So it’s no surprise that 95 percent of respondents cite data security as extremely important or important in driving their decision to adopt a cloud environment. In fact, 71 percent of respondents identify data security as the main barrier to cloud adoption.

Allaying agencies’ concerns is a widening assortment of security solutions. Take, for example, the Unisys Stealth Solution. This powerful tool renders users, data and infrastructure undetectable to cyber criminals regardless of whether a network is private or public.

By rendering workloads dark to the outside world, Stealth offers defense-grade security to the government sector without the need for expensive reconfiguring of the network. Servers are able to run side by side across both public and private clouds.

At the same time, state agencies can rest assured that only members of a predefined community are granted access to highly sensitive workloads.

Through Stealth, the Unisys secure private cloud can protect communication among virtual machines while providing security among multiple tenants in a cloud. From a public cloud perspective, the AWS Cloud, coupled with Unisys Stealth, allows state agencies to migrate their high-value, mission-critical workloads for greater cost savings and peace of mind.

5. Expert advice.
State agencies have enough to worry about without having to become cloud computing aficionados. For this reason, savvy state agencies look to cloud vendors for expert advice on everything from capacity and risk management to balancing workloads.

This is certainly the case with state agencies that hope to achieve cost efficiencies through shared services. Thirty-nine percent of survey respondents have utilized or are planning to utilize shared services agreements for cloud services.

That’s because cloud environments, whether private, public or hybrid, present the perfect opportunity for agencies of all sizes to share infrastructure and data center operational costs. However, assessing and building the best of shared services concepts requires a partner that knows how to stratify workloads across a variety of infrastructure types and balance risk for the distinct needs of various agencies.

With high-level guidance from an experienced vendor, a state agency can gain immediate access to industry best practices on shared cloud services. And as one of only a handful of vendors with experience in offering the public sector pure cloud contracts, Unisys is well equipped to offer guidance on how state agencies can contract for cloud services.

Conclusion: Answer the Cloud Calling
Austerity measures, a mobile workforce, shared services arrangements — they’re all factors pushing state agencies in a single direction: to the cloud. But leveraging the cloud to cut costs and streamline operations takes more than simply purchasing a solution. By carefully vetting a vendor for technology neutrality, ecosystem support, customization capabilities, security and high-level guidance, a state agency can optimize its cloud undertaking.