



Leveraging Managed IT Services to Modernize IT Support

A Frost & Sullivan White Paper
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INTRODUCTION

Technology is increasingly at the heart of every business. The number of mission-critical systems, platforms and applications within a typical organization continues to grow exponentially, putting an increased demand on the information technology professionals who deploy and support them. This burden is particularly acute in small and mid-size businesses (SMBs) with limited or no IT staff, but it also affects large corporations, whose IT organizations must support a diverse set of geographically distributed users. In addition, IT organizations of any size not only have to contend with their deployed technologies, but also understand the local, state and federal regulatory requirements that apply to their particular business and industry.

Today's IT organization is not only responsible for its traditional technology scope, including workstations, servers and network resources, it is also increasingly tasked to support the organization's business communications needs, including voice, video and collaboration tools, while also ensuring broad adoption of these services. Furthermore, as a company's most important assets go digital, IT is often required to design, implement and defend the business's approach to information security. And regardless of the size of the organization, the IT department is almost always asked to do ever more with an increasingly limited budget and staff.

As a result, many IT organizations are struggling to keep up. Frost & Sullivan finds that leading-edge organizations are addressing these challenges with the strategic use of managed IT services. Providers of managed IT services can augment in-house IT staff, deliver specialized skillsets and automate repetitive or menial IT functions—freeing up IT to focus on more business-critical issues and relieving line-of-business managers from having to worry about technology at all.

This white paper will delve into the fundamental challenges facing IT organizations today and highlight some of the ways managed IT services can minimize or even negate these common IT burdens.

THE IT STAFF'S DILEMMA

To fully appreciate the challenges that many IT organizations are struggling with, business leaders need to understand the competing interests that demand the time of IT practitioners. At a high level, the mission of IT within an organization, regardless of size or industry, is to deliver the appropriate technology resources to employees, with the goal of driving business objectives and improving productivity. In service of this goal, the daily work of IT centers on two areas of effort: support services and consultative or strategic services.

In most businesses, support services encompass much of the traditional duties of IT staff. Support efforts start with the hardware and software, including requisition, purchasing and management of IT assets. It is the responsibility of IT to ensure that all software licensing is in compliance, to smoothly handle hardware upgrades and refresh cycles, and ensure that software is up to date. Support services also include the full range of end-user interactions, including provisioning new users with the appropriate endpoint hardware (laptops, desk phones, etc.), software licenses and application permissions. IT also spends much of its time responding to user issues, such as trouble tickets and access requests. Finally, IT's support role includes dealing with technology vendors and service providers to ensure that network and application disruptions and downtime are kept to a minimum.

However, the most important role that an IT organization can provide to a business is also the one that is most often overlooked: consultative and strategic services. The most successful IT professionals keep abreast of the latest technologies as they come into the market and are eager to find ways to apply them to solve real-world business problems, implementing new marketing or growth initiatives, or making employees' daily work easier and more productive. In a consultant or strategic advisor role, an IT organization can transform from a cost center into a department that has a positive impact on a business's bottom line.

Unfortunately, and to the detriment of the company overall, in many organizations IT is limited to its support role. Business decisions are often made without any input from in-house technology thought leaders, who are often too busy propping up legacy technology to even think about how new tools could improve business outcomes. But, in fact, these are often the people best positioned to champion and implement next-generation technology and enable digital transformation. The challenge, then, is to figure out how to empower IT to take such a leadership role—without sacrificing the focus on day-to-day operations that, almost literally, keep the lights on.

To most effectively fulfill its goals to the business, IT needs direct engagement and a clear understanding of the current and growth objectives of the organization. Only by clearly understanding the needs of end users, various business units and corporate goals can IT managers hope to deliver the right technology resources.

FILL IN THE GAPS: MODERNIZE YOUR IT SUPPORT

In an effort to help IT staff take on a consultative role, forward-thinking businesses are leveraging managed IT services. By outsourcing some or all of the support and maintenance tasks, companies are allowing IT professionals to dedicate more time to strategic initiatives, explore new technologies and focus their energy on better business outcomes.

The role of a managed IT service provider is to take a business's existing IT infrastructure and essentially make it better. Typically, a provider will start by doing a full inventory of a client's network, hardware and software assets. With a full view of the customer's infrastructure, the provider develops a support plan to manage, maintain and ultimately optimize it by applying industry best practices and sophisticated monitoring and management tools. In addition, the managed IT services provider will work with the client to define escalation plans. In case of trouble, the provider can work with local IT resources or even contact hardware or software vendors directly for optimized issue resolution.

To do this, managed IT services providers assemble teams of highly skilled IT professionals that are able to specialize in a given area, such as data center management, IT infrastructure, software or security. These teams develop best practices and a high level of automation to be able to deploy their services quickly and at scale. Contracting with a managed IT services provider offers customers access to some of the most qualified professionals for a given technology discipline.

At the heart of a managed IT service contract is both a technology toolset—including cloud-based monitoring, management and security—and a set of best practices around using these tools to most effectively support the customer's IT environment. Along with a hardware and software inventory, the provider will identify any software and/or workflows already in use at the customer site. In cases where the existing technology is incompatible with the service provider's, the provider will work closely with the customer to rationalize infrastructure management and determine the best path forward.

To be clear, relinquishing local management and maintenance of technology resources does not mean relinquishing IT control. The business and its IT staff, not the managed services provider, set the terms of any managed IT services engagement and define the level of control and responsibility the provider takes for the company's infrastructure, applications and data. Companies can outsource all their IT assets or only certain functions or systems, such as network security. Ultimately, the customer defines the relationship with the provider and retains full administrative functions and control.

WHERE MANAGED IT SERVICES CAN HELP

Frost & Sullivan has identified six business and technology functions that can be improved with managed IT services. Each of these functions represents not just a pain point for IT staff, they are all also obstacles to moving the IT staff into strategic or consultative roles.



Infrastructure and Application Lifecycle Management Managed IT services can assume responsibility for an organization's entire hardware and software infrastructure, including end-user workstations, corporate servers and the local and wide-area networks. Through automated processes and management tools, managed IT service providers can ensure that an organization's operating systems and business software are always up to date, apply patches during off hours to minimize productivity downtime, and provide proactive and continuous monitoring of all networked devices. In addition, managed IT service providers can work closely with in-house IT staff to manage the business's technology inventory and coordinate hardware updates and replacements.



Data Protection Managed backup services give businesses assurance that their most important data—including intellectual property, ongoing work and private employee information—is securely backed up and protected in an offsite location. Beyond moving data to the safety of cloud-based backup sites, managed-backup service providers can often also function as an organization's failover site in the event of a disaster or disruption in business continuity. Re-creating an equivalent level of failover and contingency options with in-house IT resources would require a significant capital investment in redundant hardware, network bandwidth and even the physical space to host the equipment. By supporting multiple customers, managed-backup services are designed to leverage economies of scale, delivering secure backups and business continuity at a much lower cost.



Security Protecting a company's technology assets from hacking or intrusions requires the dedicated focus of an IT professional and often a very specific skillset. Hiring and retaining IT security staff has become a challenge for even large organizations. The situation is particularly dire for small and mid-sized businesses, where budget concerns often lead to the hiring of IT generalists. Managed-security services let companies leverage highly skilled security experts to protect their data, applications and networks. Managed providers stay on the cutting edge of emerging security threats and proactively push corrective solutions out to the corporate firewalls under their management.



24/7 Operations Many organizations run around the clock, even if their IT staff work only during normal business hours. Managed IT services offer 24/7 monitoring, event notifications and even break/fix resolutions. For businesses where the work never stops, IT support can be augmented to match.



New Technology Implementations As new technologies emerge, corporate IT personnel may not be ready to evaluate, deploy or support them. Managed IT services, with their teams of continuously trained experts, are well-positioned to quickly adopt and implement these new technologies. A managed services team can roll out new network, application and server technologies for their customers, and then collaborate with internal IT staff to determine a long-term management strategy for the new technology.



Small IT Staffing Many small and mid-sized organizations have small IT departments; in some cases, employees perform IT functions as a secondary responsibility. In these companies, managed IT services can serve as the business's core IT organization, providing a full scope of IT solutions while freeing up other employees to focus on the business. Managed services also help small businesses achieve technology parity with larger competitors.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A MANAGED IT SERVICES PROVIDER

Like the businesses they support, managed IT service providers can vary significantly. As such, it is incumbent on organizations to define their specific requirements and seek out providers that align closely with those needs. For example, it is important for a prospective customer of managed IT services to understand their company's own strengths and weaknesses in terms of IT management and support, and seek out a provider who will bolster their own efforts. Similarly, cost-conscious small businesses might make a predictable budget the top priority, but other businesses might give more weight to customized solutions. While there are any number of specific factors that a business could include when evaluating managed IT service providers, Frost & Sullivan has identified six criteria to ensure a successful engagement.



Technology Alignment The technology knowledge and skillset from a managed IT service provider need to hew very closely to the solutions deployed by the business. To achieve success in a managed IT services engagement, a provider must have on-staff experts to support a customer's technology better than the customer can do. A strong technology alignment between the business and provider will accelerate the management transition, foster the implementation of best practices and minimize any additional IT investments the customer may have to make.



Vendor Affiliations/Certifications There is no better validation of a managed provider's expertise than the ones that come from the leading technology vendors themselves. A managed IT services provider should be able to prove that it is current by its active involvement in vendor technology partnership programs. In addition, strong managed IT providers not only maintain their technology certification, but also foster ongoing training and certification programs to ensure that their teams can most effectively support their customers' infrastructure and application needs.



Breadth of IT Services When evaluating managed IT services providers, businesses should consider the entire range of service offerings available. Given that most organizations rely on a number of technology solutions to support their business operations, narrowing the focus to one technology or managed offering can negate future synergies between overworked IT staff and managed services teams. Maintaining relationships with multiple providers, each serving a single technology, can also create more work for the IT staff. Conversely, a single relationship with a managed IT service provider that can handle multiple IT functions will simplify management and provide a more holistic experience.



Flexibility The flexibility to customize a managed services solution to meet specific business needs, as well as adjust services as those needs change, is imperative when choosing a partner. Technology and businesses are evolving, and the relationship between an organization and a managed IT services provider needs to reflect that.



Flexible Cost Structures The need for managed IT services varies among businesses, along with the ways they want to pay for them. Flexible cost structures, including flat-rate, subscription-based and per-user models, are an important consideration, allowing organizations to consume services in the way that best suits them. For example, businesses with seasonal spikes in demand may opt for per-user pricing to align with the surge of temporary workers, while organizations with a more static workforce might be better off with a predictable pricing structure.



Stability/Track Record Contracting with a managed IT services provider is more than a single business transaction; it's a long-term relationship undertaken by both the organization and the provider, with the shared goal of delivering more efficient management and maintenance. As such, it is particularly important to consider the viability of the provider. Providers with a proven track record of success, and a history of both financial and management stability, should rise to the top in the evaluation process.

CALL TO ACTION

Organizations of all sizes are heavily reliant on technology to maintain and grow their business, putting a significant burden on their IT staffs to support, maintain and protect those technology assets. Managed IT service providers are ready, willing and able to augment local IT staffing by removing the often-menial support operations from their daily work, as well as ensuring that a business's infrastructure is reliable, secure and resilient. Choosing the right managed services partner—one that closely aligns with the business—can have a profound impact on the IT organization, enabling it to focus on strategic efforts: providing thought leadership, leveraging technical knowledge to improve business workflow and employee productivity, and positively impacting the organization's future growth.



ABOUT TPX COMMUNICATIONS

TPx Communications is a new kind of managed services provider – the premier national managed services carrier. TPx is redefining the way enterprises grow, compete and communicate. TPx's Unified Communications, Managed IT services, continuity and connectivity solutions all work together to “reach a higher state of connectedness” – with customers, employees, clients, suppliers, locations, applications and more. We can provide guaranteed performance wherever there's a broadband connection, erasing the limitations of geography, incumbent providers and capital expenditure. Headquartered in Los Angeles, with major locations across the country, TPx has delivered more than 15 years of consecutive quarter-over-quarter growth, driven by a DNA of obsessive customer service and word-of-mouth referral. For more information, go to www.tpx.com

NEXT STEPS 

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