

Key Points

Managed service providers are available to handle any IT-related task, including systems, storage, networking, security, and more.

Knowing whether your company needs an MSP depends on your ability to analyze your own requirements, including present and future needs.

The size of a business can play into the potential need for a managed service, but a business' reliance on a particular technology might be a better deciding factor.

Establishing a high level of trust is crucial to ensuring a successful relationship with an MSP, so customers should discover precisely what they'll be receiving.

Managed Mindset

How To Select The Right Managed Service Provider

YOU CAN SCOUR EVERY FOREST on the planet, but you're still unlikely to find a tree that lets you pluck manpower, time, and technical expertise from its branches. Yet there's a service model that comes darn close to offering this low-hanging fruit, and the good news is it's available to every business, regardless of size, scope, and industry.

MSPs (managed service providers) assume the responsibility of one or more IT-related tasks for businesses on an ongoing, proactive basis, or simply when called upon. These individual services can cover everything from storage, security, and systems/network management to telecommunications, supply

chain management, and even utilities. For businesses, this model provides a cost-saving opportunity to bring expert service in-house without hiring additional employees or stretching existing resources.

"Today, there are a number of different types and sizes of MSPs ranging from telecommunication companies, global system integrators, boutiques, and IT solution providers," says Dragana Vranic, director of managed services for Forsythe (www.forsythe.com). "All these MSPs, regardless of size, can deliver similar services, including monitoring configuration management, updates, patches, risk management, [and]

►► Be Inquisitive

When selecting a managed service provider, companies are often faced with a dizzying array of choices that can lead to an improper fit if they didn't perform due diligence. Dragana Vranic, director of managed services for Forsythe (www.forsythe.com), recommends finding answers to the following questions to determine the best MSP fit for your company:

Will you have access to experts when it is needed?

What are the escalation procedures?

Does the MSP have the resources and capabilities to handle an emergency should one occur?

Are the service and response times acceptable for your business?

What kind of analysis and reporting will your company receive?

Will the provided services be coming from a domestic source or an offshore source?

Does the MSP have any quality management internal processes?

compliance requirements. The difference between MSPs is the quality and flexibility they provide in delivering these services. Clients should review the performance and additional services—such as on-site professional services—of the MSP in order to determine best fit.”

INSIGHT THROUGH INTROSPECTION

Determining the type of MSP that's right for your business starts with an internal analysis of your own organization. Companies need to determine what they're buying, even if they've already engaged with an MSP, and they need to establish their own service-level



“The ability of the MSP to tailor solutions to the customers' needs can be limited in the larger MSPs, so the client should take this into consideration.”

Dragana Vranic

director of managed services, Forsythe



“One of the best ways to select an MSP is to ask for and talk to existing customers who the MSP already services. The closer those customers are in size, scope, or vertical, the better.”

Vince Plaza

vice president of IT, TeamLogic IT

requirements, the pain points to be addressed, and any future requirements. This way, Vranic says, the service-level contract can allow the business to easily meet those expectations.

“The company should consider how much of their IT needs they want to outsource to the MSP,” says Vince Plaza, vice president of IT at TeamLogic IT (www.teamlogicit.com). “Most SMBs can typically outsource all of their IT needs, whereas larger organizations may have in-house responsibilities for local infrastructure and desktops while they may outsource servers, monitoring, and other services to the MSP.”

Plaza says companies should also consider whether they need both managed services and project work, because if they do, they'll need an MSP that can provide both remote and onsite support when required. From Plaza's experience as an MSP, he says it's nearly impossible to avoid sending technicians online for certain tasks, such as replacing hardware or working on projects unrelated to managed services.

“An organization should also work to understand what the MSP's operational procedures are,” Vranic advises. “How are they delivering their services? What is the mean time to respond to and resolve issues? What types of internal processes have they adopted—

ISO standards, for example—to ensure their performance and responsiveness? They should also look at onshore vs. offshore capabilities and the culture fit of the MSP. The client needs to ensure that the agreement they develop with the MSP allows [the client] to meet the needs of their own internal business clients in a way that is a true partnership/extension of their team.”

SIZE CONCERNS

Part of the equation for selecting an MSP includes the size of an organization, which might even help a business determine that it doesn't need an MSP at all. Antonio Piraino, chief technology officer at ScienceLogic (www.sciencelogic.com), notes that the size of the business can be more vital as an indicator of the need for a service provider than the vertical market it's in.

“Small startup businesses, especially brick-and-mortar businesses, will typically be far more limited in budget, in-house IT expertise, and in the complexity of their IT infrastructure deployment. That means that having the basics of a website and email system might suffice, and hence a shared hosting provider is enough. As that business grows, or does more of its business online, the need to have a billing and charge-back tool, a backend database, a CRM

system, and firewall services becomes increasingly important. Larger retailers would also be looking for PCI-DSS [data security standard?]-compliant service providers to handle their transactions," Piraino says.

A larger business might have a big IT department with manpower to spare, but that doesn't mean it has the level of support for the migration and continued management of these complex systems. Piraino adds that certain sizable companies might seek far less management and far more of an ecosystem within which to manage their

that need to be addressed, and therefore a service provider meeting SOX- or HIPAA-compliant infrastructure from a disaster recovery, security, or archiving perspective is going to naturally be more appropriate to that business."

FINDING A FIT

According to Piraino, smaller companies are more inclined to use local IT professionals, whereas larger organizations tend to use more extensive infrastructure offerings provided by big MSPs. The technical level of service might differ between these types of

Business size shouldn't always be a deciding factor in whether a company seeks the help of an MSP. Plaza notes that company size is not always as important as how dependent a business is on the technology a managed service might deliver. For example, he says that a small company with fewer than 25 employees that relies heavily on critical systems (such as servers and networks) would benefit from a good MSP as much as a larger company that also depends on these systems.

"For these companies that have systems that need to be up and monitored 24x7—and any significant outages of those systems could have a disastrous effect on business—an MSP that provides that type of service would be essential," Plaza says. "On the other side, a company, small or large, that doesn't rely as heavily on their technology may not benefit much from managed services. For these companies, where a downed computer or server doesn't result in potentially ruinous damage to their business, there may only be a small subset of managed services that they would benefit from."

ENSURE TRUST

It's crucial for companies to ensure there's a high level of trust with a potential MSP. According to Piraino, the most trustworthy service providers are those that can deliver adequate visibility and control into the customer's environment. Of course, these levels can vary depending on what you're willing to pay, but Piraino says that assurances and visibility can put the customer's mind at ease.

"Knowing that you have saved money, increased your flexibility—for example, for change requests—and can hold someone accountable for a superior service is what using a service provider is all about; otherwise, none would do it. Ask to test out their IT environment, ask them for strong monitoring and management tools, and ask for an SLA [service level agreement]," he says. ●



"A provider can provide you with the environment and tools to make smart commercial business and operational business decisions. [It can] enable your business services and allows you to focus on what you know best: your core business."

Antonio Piraino

chief technology officer, ScienceLogic



"If the company is sophisticated enough, they will know with some accuracy what they need from a MSP. Others may not know what they need but only know what IT problems they are having."

Charles Weaver

co-founder and president, MSPAlliance

infrastructure and add missing applications or components, such as billing systems. In these cases, a provider offering IaaS (infrastructure as a service) or PaaS (platform as a service) might be a good option, particularly if it provides usage-based pricing.

"However, accessing this infrastructure takes more of a technical acumen than, say, an employee using a user-friendly interface to manage their financial application," Piraino says. "Admittedly, there are certain verticals—namely, the financial, health-care, and federal sectors—that have more stringent regulatory parameters

providers, but it's also important to remember that the approach may differ, as well.

"The size—and other factors—of the MSP play into whether [it is] ideally positioned to service the client," says Charles Weaver, co-founder and president of the MSPAlliance (www.mspalliance.com). "Generally, a larger MSP cannot provide the same level of intimacy and customer service to the client as a smaller MSP. Larger MSPs usually have more capabilities to handle larger clients, just in terms of more resources, better processes, and less risk compared to a smaller, less-equipped MSP."