

Using managed IT services

Allan Carton explains what 'managed IT services' are and how they can be used by law firms to save on cost and make life easier for themselves.

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Providers of “managed IT services” and the solutions they offer have just come of age and are proving very effective for the law firms that are leading the way down this route to maintain more reliable, secure, effective IT systems, either just in key areas or across the board. Yet, while virtually every firm can improve on IT in terms of cost and performance, identifying the options can be difficult.

“Managed services” come in many varieties. They range from using an expert to maintain some areas of your IT where they have particular expertise, such as security (perhaps working on your system online from their premises), to providing IT personnel to do the IT work in your office; and to hosting some or all of your IT systems on their equipment at their premises (which you access online from your offices) – all subject to contractual service level agreements.

The mix of managed services - including “hosting”, “outsourcing” and “Software as a Service” (SaaS) - that will produce the best results depends on the size of your firm, nature of the business and mix of internal resources available.

The rapid increase in the range of options here stems from the increased ability to use the Internet securely, quickly and reliably to connect:

- From a support company to the system sitting in your office - to access, diagnose and resolve software problems on your system remotely. Support companies can have a large bank of specialist knowledge and skill sitting in their central office servicing the needs of many customers who each could not afford that level of expertise;
- From your firm - to access, submit and use data stored on systems managed by a support company at their location, which they can actively monitor, manage, soothe and tweak, using levels of expertise – and technology solutions for security, connectivity etc. – that one firm alone cannot afford.

Also because:

- Rapid “convergence” of all communication technologies means that data – voice (telephone, dictation, messages etc.), your emails, video or documents – can be read digitally by a range of interchangeable devices. You can dictate on a mobile phone and phone from your PC.
- Critical elements of these services can be managed 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year (24/7/365), by providers geared up with enough people and expertise to do this effectively – on site with you or at their premises.
- Home and remote users can get support outside normal business hours by calling the provider after your IT people have gone home for the night or over the weekend.
- Monthly charges, rather than up front capital investment options; so you effectively rent hardware, software and services on a per user per month basis, or based on the volume of data or transactions.
- Different firms will have different reasons for considering the use of “managed services,” including:
 - Concerns about expertise and availability of in-house IT staff. Technical solutions are very complex now so a small team cannot be expert in everything. The best IT staff – who know their limitations - can benefit most.
 - Sudden growth through e.g. merger or down-sizing change demands on IT; additional support for growth and flexibility for downsizing at a proportionate cost is attractive.

- IT teams can spend too much time fire-fighting, so high priority issues like security, workflow development and database development are left on the back burner.
- Downtime is just no longer acceptable, so better technical expertise and proven solutions are needed. Sharing the resources, now that it is possible, makes sense

Examples of the solutions:

- Some applications just cannot be allowed to fail, where “managed service” providers add reliability – whether they “host” your services on their premises or you “outsource” management of the systems in your office to them. For example:
 - **Your email** – where a “hosting” provider will guarantee to maintain your email system 24/7; to deliver clean, filtered email with 99.9% uptime, to support remote users, and more.
 - **Automated backups** of accounts and your system overall to a secure remote location away from the office; actively managed, tested and available to be restored reliably and quickly.
 - **Disaster recovery** facilities (now a Lexcel requirement) so your people can then log direct into the pre-configured recovery setup to start work from any location virtually immediately – with the complexities managed by the supplier.
 - **Network connections** to the Internet, between offices and to remote workers, actively managed to the extent of being able to interrogate a router being used on the network by a home user.
 - **Security**, which includes protection against hackers, encryption, virus protection, where use of online services (including email) is routine.
- There are other areas where there is potential to achieve big improvements in day-to-day operations. For example:
 - **Management of telecoms** services using the Internet to channel calls (using VoIP – “Voice over Internet Protocol”) creates opportunities to bring all forms of communication (written, dictated, telephone, mobile) together providing better back up options and easier access to all kinds of data from anywhere through mobile communications.
 - **Storage of data** – with most firms now using email and electronic documents as routine and aiming to store archives electronically, there are options to store and access the data off site in really secure environments.

You will find more information and case studies on how law firms are using these services at MSC - see www.managedservicesconsultancy.com.

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