



COVER STORY

Cooking Up Some Managed Services? A Full Menu Awaits

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By [Dan Neel](#),

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Solution providers adding managed services to their portfolio now have the luxury of choosing several different ways to do so.

Prefabricated MSP platforms from vendors such as Kaseya, Cittio, N-able Technologies, Silverback and LLP Level Platforms, just to name a few, are attracting an increasing number of solution providers. These “out-of-the-box” MSP offerings can, relatively quickly, put a solution provider in business offering remote monitoring, software delivery, security management and incident resolution. Whether they are leased or bought outright, these off-the-shelf MSP solutions sit handily on a solution provider’s in-house server, and partners report healthy ROI.

The functionality of these MSP platforms is similar, but the vendors, like most, resist comparisons. Their promises, approaches and pricing schemes vary greatly. But there does appear to be a trend taking shape in one important area—more of these vendors now allow solution providers to test-drive their MSP platforms before making a commitment.

Co-branded MSP offerings are also growing in number. Because these services can be beamed into a solution provider’s customer environment without the solution provider having to host or maintain the MSP platform, they are the simplest to engage. And co-branded services are available from practically every area of the industry. Security vendors such as McAfee can remotely guard messaging systems and thwart viruses, telcos such as MCI can beam in enterprise application management, IBM can take the reins of an entire IT network and recently launched a midmarket Express Managed Services offering to bring such a skill to the masses. Distributors are getting into the game as well by reselling the services of large MSPs. Options for solution providers to co-brand, or rebrand, the customer interface and call the service their own are readily available.

Solution providers are still building MSP platforms themselves, too. It’s not as hard as one might think, said Cynthia Norris, director of monitoring services at Computer Assets, Espanola, N.M.

Fate cast Norris into the role of building Computer Assets’ MSP platform by herself, she said. Norris holds no technical certifications and is a self-described “once-laid-off high-tech worker.” But when the owners asked her to create a way to monitor customer environments in an effort to offer preventative maintenance, Norris stepped up. Without the guidance of an MSP vendor program, Norris cobbled together monitoring systems from IBM Tivoli, Ipswitch’s WhatsUp Gold, and SingleStep Technologies, and coupled it all with IP telephony systems from Avaya to create a home-grown MSP platform. She understood the basic network topology, communicated closely

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with vendors, and simply went for it, keeping things “on the cheap” whenever possible and securing the remote connection to customers in the simplest fashion.

“We are currently doing a point-to-point NAT [network address translation]. As the monitoring signal comes through the firewall it comes directly to us. But I might change how that is set up. I’m thinking about a dual NIC structure—one pointed in and another pointed out—and then we would have some type of authentication,” she said.

But rolling up your sleeves to build an MSP platform from scratch is not for everyone.

Jon Nitto, president of The RetroTechs, a 15-year-old, \$3-million-per-year solution provider based in Atlanta, has the talent in-house to build an MSP platform from scratch. But after deciding to add managed services, Nitto went the out-of-the-box route, almost buying the N-able MSP platform flat out before deciding to test-drive it through the vendor’s new MSP Startup program—a 30-day trial at \$99 a customer.

“Partnering [with an MSP vendor] seems the wisest choice, otherwise we would have had to devote a lot of time and a lot of money,” said Nitto. “If you can find a prepackaged MSP solution that is proven and that works, it’s hard to justify making a larger commitment to resources and cost.”

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Euthenics resells and routinely co-brands Corente’s managed service platform, a suite of tools hosted at Corente’s network operations center in East Brunswick, N.J., that can remotely serve up complete, managed user interface environments for all types of businesses, said Nicolau. Euthenics excels in reselling the Corente services into POS environments, he said, adding that McDonald’s is one of Euthenics’ biggest customers.

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