

Professional services drive



Richard Eglon

The role of third party support companies has become far more strategic over the last 12 months, moving away from traditional stock in trade support functions towards customer collaboration and professional services.

Outsourcing has long been a difficult proposition for companies trying to make cost savings and increase efficiencies, and never more so than in the current economic turbulence. "With shrinking budgets and revenue streams under threat many organisations are faced with making difficult decisions about the future structure of IT support services and staffing," stated Darren Briscoe, Technical Director, Comms-care. "Outsourcing is now vital to the ongoing support of end user infrastructure in order for depleted partner teams to effectively support activities within their customer environments. Where geography or lack of technical skills is an issue, Comms-care is increasingly finding that partners are turning to third party maintenance providers to assist."

Richard Eglon, Marketing Manager at Comms-care, noted: "In the last four years Comms-care has developed its service proposition in line with partner demand and now sees a 50:50 split between server and comms support, adopting support services across server vendors including HP, Dell, IBM and Fujitsu. Comms-care has also experienced high demand for professional services, as partners want specialist installation and consultancy skills across technologies including wireless, unified communications, security, enterprise servers and IP telephony."

According to Darren Briscoe, Technical Director at Comms-care, Outsourcing has long been a difficult proposition for companies trying to make cost savings and increase efficiencies, and never more so than for SMEs in the current economic turbulence. "Key to Comms-

care's success is delivering the consistent message that however small the requirement don't be afraid to ask for assistance, simply expand your services by outsourcing. There are many ways we can help smaller partners with the use of SLA based vouchers schemes for emergencies, free pre-sales, design consultancy and fixed project costs whereby Comms-care carries all the risk of projects over running. The message is simple, any size partner business can benefit from outsourcing."

Greater reliance

The challenging economic climate in recent years has had a huge impact on the outsourcing arena. In order to survive, resellers have had to adopt a much more flexible approach to the needs of their customers, resulting in a greater reliance on outsourcing services. "Organisations have had to streamline their businesses in this period of uncertainty, leading to a reduction of in-house skill sets, geographic coverage and day-to-day resource," observed Eglon. "To plug these gaps the cost-effectiveness of outsourcing has been much more straightforward to justify, though it is highly recommend that organisations looking to outsource ensure vigorous

due diligence is undergone on any outsourcing partner."

Concentrating on the core business is a sound plan in the current climate, points out Briscoe. "It's easy to become distracted when trying to grow a business in a volatile economy," he said. "Focusing on the your strengths and the best you have to offer, while still allowing for growth through strategic partnerships is a good way to improve margins, without the risk of over stretching the core business. Outsourcing to third parties is an effective way to achieve this."

Trends in third party maintenance and support over the last 12 months have shifted from using an outsourcer on an ad hoc, only when needed basis to outsourcing the complete solution including pre-install meeting, project management, installation, commission and customer training. That's according to Paul Ballinger, Sales Director at Nine Shipton, who says that just 12 months

ago the firm was fulfilling basic small SME installs for the channel, but today it finds itself involved in the sale cycle, positioning project management and professional services at a higher value. "This elevates the channel's offer, delivers a clean installation, improves customer satisfaction and gets the invoice paid on time," commented Ballinger.

Each of Nine Shipton's engineers has a six month solution accreditation plan with the appropriate vendor. "It's important to our channel partners that we continue to deliver a highly accredited engineering resource across a range of key vendors," added Ballinger. "It has always been the ethos at Nine to deliver what we do well and our sights are set on maintaining that commitment."

When Nine is engaged early in the sales cycle and providing a joined up offer with the channel, it wins 90 per cent of the opportunities and some of these have been valued in excess of £100k. "A channel can supplement their

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e demand for outsourcing

engineering services with our accredited team on an *a la carte* basis, which can be of real benefit where the cost of in-house vendor accreditation cannot be justified by the channel for the low volume of sales which actually require it," commented Ballinger.

The biggest benefit to resellers has to be trust, believes Ballinger. "We deliver a quality installation, working with the channel, allowing them to cover more opportunities in a very competitive environment, confident that we will reflect their levels of customer service to the end user. All channels are reluctant to bring another party into the customer relationship, as they may be seen as competition. Nine maintains a high level of integrity with the channels and all those that have used our services once have used them again. That is a great message for us."

Demand has changed away from basic maintenance to partners wanting a multitude of services. This still includes basic maintenance but,

observes Angus McCaffery, Director at Maintel, also includes working with partners to provide auditing, designing, advising, before supplying, project managing and maintaining the whole solution. "The key is to identify what it is you are good at and focus on this," he said. "Our strengths are in ensuring that we have engineers in the right place at the right time to do the job right first time. In essence, our engineers are our product and we invest heavily in our engineers' training and development to keep them up to date with the latest technologies. This process is wholly led by the demands of our partners, which include several of the UK's top telecoms and data businesses."

Profit matters

Critical for partners is that they not only need a job to be carried out well, they also need to make a profit, and with Maintel's economies of scale it can provide services at a level that enables the reseller to sell on at a margin and without the cost or

hassle of doing it themselves. Maintel has worked with third parties for 20 years and has the credibility and trust of the reseller community. "Whether a global telco or a smaller local reseller, we are completely trusted and remain impartial while protecting the resellers' interests. We are proud of this fact and it's testament to the repeat long-term business we win," enthused McCaffery.

Maintel's main focus is to continue to invest in data skills. McCaffery added: "We have identified a need to enhance our data skills, particularly for building and running the WAN and LAN services. We tend to be discreet about our service provision but it's worth stating that we currently have one of the largest data networks under our management and already carry out a lot more data work than many in the industry recognise."

Maintel's online fault reporting tool Webcall provides partners with a

transparent view of customer information, right down to live faults with all of the related notes. "Nothing is out of sight plus the partner can use the tool to look at fault history or system information, run reports and view trends. More than 20 per cent of all faults logged with Maintel are logged online," added McCaffery.

Extended workforce

Nimans' On-Site Services division also acts as an extension to a reseller's own workforce. Andrew Atack, Nimans' Technical Support and Services Manager, said: "We provide resellers with UK-wide access to installation, maintenance and professional services such as project management. This service is part of our ethos to deliver complete reseller solutions from start to finish, across all aspects of the supply chain.

"I don't think the concept has fully taken off yet. There's still great potential about how we as businesses can share resources geographically. Providing it

is managed and delivered as a white label service it can work very well. In many ways it's a common sense solution with no commercial conflicts."

The On-Site Services division is particularly attractive to smaller resellers, however no matter what size of company, resource issues should not restrict sales potential, says Atack. "Smaller companies can be restricted in selling because they haven't always got the manpower to deliver what customers require," he added.

"We know of dealers that are sales-based and rely on third party maintenance. There is also a lot of legacy products that people can no longer maintain because they can't source the spares. A smaller reseller that may have sites scattered across the country will rely on us for those that can't be maintained. We have customers in Ireland with sites in Scotland where it isn't viable to send out their own staff. It comes down to building productive partnerships." ■

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