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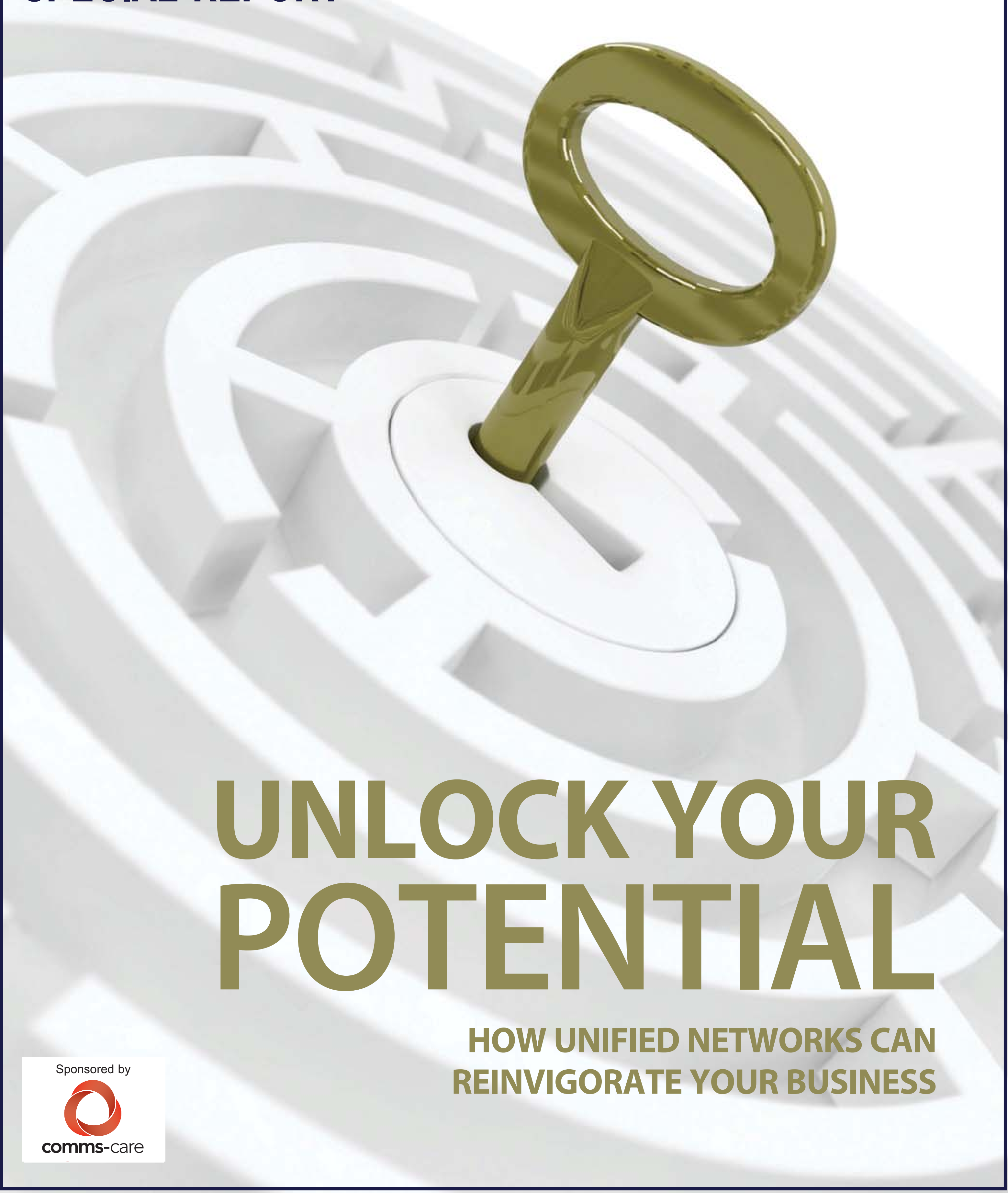

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As businesses rely more and more on the availability and performance of their IT infrastructure it is critical that IT channel partners have the support services to fulfil this demand. Comms-care recognise this and have designed a wide range of IT support services that include Maintenance, Installation, Health checks, Security and IP Telephony. Working to support only channel partners, Comms-care realise the importance of the channel model and pride themselves in offering their Customers with an unrivalled level of support.

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editorial

Fight for unification needs more backup

Third party support services can plug skills gaps, enable unified networks and let staff become fully mobile, says **Sara Yirrell**

Convergence, especially around unified networks, seems to be a tired old phrase in the channel, until you start exploring just how far the concept has actually been implemented and what the level of understanding is around it.

Because most firms have legacy systems with components from multiple vendors, implementing a smooth, unified communications system, that can be accessed anyplace, anytime, anywhere, requires a lot of technical expertise and is more of a minefield than most people would admit.

A lot of resellers have shied away from pushing unified networks because they feel they are lacking certain technical skills and do not have the time or resources to invest in training staff up to the required standard.

However, on the flip side, there are a range of third party support services on offer from suppliers such as Comms-care to help VARs plug any skills gaps in their own workforce and secure that all important sale.

Most firms, particularly those without their own IT department, will immediately turn to the channel for the advice and implementation of a unified network, and more often than not it is a recurring revenue stream for the partner in terms of support and maintenance and future upgrades.

The benefits of a unified network for the customers themselves are immense – which means it will hopefully make an easier sell for the channel. Employees on the move can access the company system when needed and managers can finally get that mobile workforce that they have been dreaming about.

Managers can actually get that mobile workforce they have been dreaming about

Sara Yirrell, CRN

In addition, staff are happier because of increased flexible working which means they are not chained to their desks or restrained by outdated IT equipment. It could also help cut down on travelling costs which will encourage those firms looking to reduce their carbon footprint to invest in a unified network. However, unified communications are not all about cutting costs, they are also about adding functionality – either way the customer cannot lose.

So if all that has been stopping you is worry over a lack of skills, try the third party support route and you could find a whole new revenue stream opening up for you.

Sara Yirrell is editor of CRN.

Official sponsor **Comms-care**

Textbook integration is a possible dream

Scott Yates explains why convergence specialists are crucial to help firms streamline their communications

The term ‘convergence’ seems to have been bandied around the channel for close to 10 years now and most customers are still none the wiser on the key issues and benefits.

Most of us agree that integrating our voice, data, video and mobile communications across a single network is fundamental for businesses looking to streamline their technology infrastructure. Adopting a single-network approach also means staff have the added benefit of 24/7 accessibility whatever their location or preferred technology device, ensuring that companies can adjust to customer demands quickly and efficiently.

Convergence therefore sounds like communications ‘nirvana’, but in reality it is a very different story. In an ideal world you would want a seamless integrated communications network that was provided by a single vendor, providing your voice, data and security solutions all under one umbrella with the utmost of ease. However, in most cases organisations’ data and voice infrastructure has been built up over time from a wide range of products supplied by a variety of vendors.

Single IP-based networks have not only arrived, but will be here to stay

Scott Yates, Comms-care

This is where organisations need to ensure that they have the technical skills and resources in place before they start to implement a converged network solution.

In order to address some of the key issues such as quality of service, security, infrastructure and employees’ adoption of the new system, it can be useful to utilise the skills of a vendor independent convergence specialist such as Comms-care. This expert in the field has experience that reaches across many vendors, products and technologies which ensures businesses receive advice that has their best interests in mind, both commercially and technologically.

Investing in new technologies can often mean increased costs, especially in the short term. However, with many convergence projects, the mid- to long-term benefits are very appealing due to the impact they can have on reducing the operational costs of a company. By integrating an IP network you are also putting tracking measures in place to assist how you interface with all your customers, prospects and partners.

Convergence is now being implemented on a global scale due to critical elements being addressed including industry standards, core infrastructure, security and technology advances.

The impact of this in a world that demands 24/7 communication means that single IP-based networks which fuse a multitude of technologies have not only arrived, but will be here to stay.

Scott Yates is managing director of Comms-care.

Gareth Kershaw gets some answers to how resellers can tap into the burgeoning unified communications (UC) market

Supporting all the latest mod

It is a perennial dilemma for the average reseller. Perhaps even **THE** perennial dilemma. Do you stick to the niches you know and consequently pass up the high-value, big ticket, glacial roll-out deals because you do not have the skills, the logistics and the headcount to cope? Or do you try to turn yourself into a hulking behemoth that does the lot – with all the massive associated risk and expense; which itself is far easier said than done, of course.

Talk about Hobson's Choice.

In reality, most resellers try to plough a furrow somewhere down the middle of these two approaches. A sort of "No job is too big, no fee is too big" stance. The problem being, obviously, that you can end up stuck in the mud as neither one thing nor the other.

This is particularly pertinent where the currently booming unified communications (UC) market is concerned. There is massive and increasing demand, but how do you tap into it without busting your expenditure and upping your operational risk with extra headcount?

Richard Eglon, marketing manager with third-party service provider Comms-care, says that the most obvious – and profitable – answer is simply to partner up with providers that do have the requisite headcount and skill sets.

"There are major opportunities out there for the properly geared reseller," he said. "And joining forces with a third-party provider offers a fast, watertight, high-quality, profitable way to get in on the convergence act without putting your business at risk in any way.

"Converged UC is a huge market right now – bigger than most people even realise. Networking these days is converged networking. It is suddenly a mass-market proposition. While VoIP used to be a fairly niche application, for example, now it is right in the middle of the mainstream. As such, it is not so much a question of if a company will move to converged, unified networking, as when."

Now really is the time to capitalise, he says.

Also, not only is UC much more of a "pull" market now, says Eglon, the whole idea of unification is evolving to encompass a much broader set of technologies; offering yet further opportunity for the savvy player in areas such as video, mobility, CRM, ERP and line of business applications.

"However, with such expansion, comes a problem. You cannot possibly retain all the necessary skills in-house to allow you to fully exploit these widening gaps in the market," he said.

"Find the right partner with the requisite skilled, qualified resource and you as the reseller get a broader portfolio, rapid access to market, security and peace of mind for both you and your client, and genuine flexibility of service and offering."

Scott Dobson is managing director of Vcomm, a trade-only VAD that provides IP telephony products and services to the channel. He agrees that while many resellers have excellent skills in one area, they often lack the all-round expertise to unlock the bigger deals.

"The UC space is evolving very quickly with all of the major voice and data hardware vendors making a play," he says. "However, the one to watch is Microsoft which owns almost all of the desktops from an OS, messaging and calendar perspective. That is circa 7,000 resellers in the UK alone that have a client base for Microsoft's UC offering Office Communications Server [OCS].

"However, while these channels most certainly have the Microsoft skills to capitalise on the opportunity, and while many also understand the network implications and have server skills too, where almost all of them need help is in VoIP integration to existing telephony environments, such as the PBX and the PSTN," says Dobson.

Comms-care managing director Scott Yates cites this need as a major influencing factor. "It is all much more application-driven now. It is much more than a case of simply ripping out and replacing old PBXs. Customers want and expect more than just another telephony system."

This is driving a massive demand for highly skilled engineers, says Yates, which is in turn causing huge resourcing problems for many resellers that often end up paying a premium for engineers qualified at CCIE standard or similar.

However, he notes, the ROI for all concerned tends to far exceed that of traditional networking products. And current demand is such that while it may cost more to offer unification services, these costs can often be passed on to the end user, which is itself happy to pay for the added functionality and value. Often to the tune of 40 margin points for

Life line: The support of well-qualified providers can help you crack the burgeoning UC market.

Without offering interoperability, the vendor is simply being lazy

Dave Millett, Inclarity

comms

the reseller, according to Yates.

Dave Millett, operations director at Inclarity sees things in a similar light. "A reseller may not have the core skills to support every device, so before launching a new device or service, VARs need to incur costs to gain these skills before any revenue comes in, which can prevent them from acting altogether," he says. "And this has driven the demand for third-party service providers to bolt these skills on rather than gaining them in house."

Attractive employees

A further major driver, says Millett, is that in hiring people with new skill sets, or in developing new skill sets in incumbent employees, a VAR will by definition make his people more attractive to his rivals and to the rest of the market, and will therefore have to pay more to retain such people.

Resellers also need to alter the focus of their skills and tool sets, says Jurgen Hekkink, solutions marketing manager at integrator Affiniti.

"Systems integration is becoming an increasingly important element in the provisioning of UC; the ability to glue different software modules together to function as a single entity," he says. "Also the ability to do software modifying and customisation, as well as the capability to merge applications together based on open standards and middleware platforms is gaining in importance."

Although he says it is important in this instance for all-round communications integrators to have the core UC skill sets in-house, it is impossible to specialise in all of them; to maintain true expertise in every application on every system.

"[Resellers therefore do] need specialist partners. Whether this is the integration into physical security systems, advanced video equipment, content management and delivery, or homegrown LoB applications, integrators need a solid structure to work efficiently with third parties. Core to the SI skill set is the ability to manage the end-to-end project efficiently through every project phase and to be a credible, responsible partner to the end-user," Hekkink adds.

Kelly MacMillan, market specialist at Mitel, concurs. "While for many, IP telephony adoption has yet to reach the second stage of maturity, whereby customers are looking beyond dial tone, it is vital to convey a vision of what this technology offers. Never before has it been more important for resellers to be able to clearly understand end user issues and requirements in order to develop a genuine solution that meets their needs.

Partner ecosystems

"Partnerships are key here, and VARs should be exploring the development of their own partner ecosystem to take advantage of the multitude of end-user applications and custom development opportunities that exist. For the sophisticated reseller, building partnerships between IT specialists and communications VARs will expand their opportunity into new accounts and generate new revenue streams into their existing bases."

For many, she explains, the advantage of partnering is that it enables both parties to engage with the customer without having to become experts on technologies with which they are unfamiliar, and that may allow them to work together to share their respective customer base to cross-sell and up-sell corresponding offerings.

"It is significant to note that some resellers have rightly predicted the direction technology is taking and have already moved into the IT space and are developing custom applications into targeted markets," says MacMillan. "Such craftsmanship has proven a very profitable endeavour for these VARs, while others are simply outsourcing this development to IT specialists.

"Smart resellers will continue to build expertise across multiple layers of technology but, importantly, they will focus on resolving critical business issues with a view to technology as an enabler of business, not as a magic panacea to solve all ills.

"It is vital for the reseller to decide what its core capabilities are and to ensure that it has the correct level of resources, skills and experience to support its portfolio," says Hekkink, and this is where third-party services providers can help – allowing resellers to adopt smart introduction processes to look at new emerging technologies and to adopt these into their portfolios in a structured, controlled way.

"So instead of gearing the whole services organisation up, it might make sense to partner with smaller

Maintaining a controlled approach

The second annual Public Sector IP Migration survey from Westell looking into views and attitudes towards moving over to IP-based voice communications reveals that over four times more organisations are considering gradual migration as opposed to the rip and replacement of legacy PBX infrastructures as a possible means to shift to IP-based comms.

The research shows that while migration to IP has moved since the last survey, take-up is steady rather than accelerating, with 39.5 per cent of respondents confirming plans to move over to IP comms within a distant three to five year timeline.

Other key findings included:

- 39.5 per cent of organisations surveyed said they would take three to five years to move over to IP comms against 41.5 per cent last year.
- Just 9 per cent of respondents are planning to move over to IP comms within the next six months in line with 9.25 per cent last year.
- Only 10.3 per cent were willing to rip and replace legacy infrastructure against the 46.2 per cent noting migration as their method of choice.

Joining forces with a third-party provider offers a fast, watertight, high-quality, profitable way to get in on the convergence act

Richard Eglon, Comms-care

specialist partners, and build a core of expertise in-house that focuses on the expertise and skills required to move forward into new markets."

InClarity's Millett cautions resellers to be careful not to dilute their client presence or to undermine their core offerings too much however, as by using third party service providers VARs "may risk weakening their own message".

"The VAR is positioning itself as manager of the UC, but without the skills in house to support every device/service. How does a customer validate those capabilities? If it is an area where you do not have the skill set, the customer may rightly question your claim to be an expert."

Here, he says, vendors need to do their bit and provide simple, supportable solutions that will not hamper resellers from adding their solutions to the mix.

"Interoperability is one example – without offering it the vendor is simply being lazy when it comes to supporting its VARs. Often vendors will try to develop on too many fronts and de-prioritise the support required for its reseller partners.

"FMC and UC have been over-hyped for many years, but for the end customer, what does it achieve? Many will benefit from doing the bulk of it, rather than going for the whole hog from day one. Rather than going for 'UC nirvana', most companies would benefit from some basic steps towards UC, taken one at a time."

As such, according to Hekkink, resellers should look for three qualities in potential partners: innovation, advanced skills, and reliability.

"The partner's skill set should be complementary, but without too much overlap. It is also critical that both parties are open and honest with each other on where and how they will work together, the partnership's aim and future expectations."

Everyone's a winner

Here, as long as the reseller and specialist partner both play to their core strengths, then a win-win relationship can be developed, says Hekkink. "Customers like to see clear project ownership and will expect the reseller to manage partners successfully."

In other words, resellers should avoid partnering with organisations that may have hidden or secondary goals, or have interests that may conflict with those of the end customer.

So beware those with direct competitors or with an apparent desire to build any kind of direct relationships with your customer.

"This can easily sour a partnering relationship and could cause problems in delivering an excellent customer experience," says Hekkink.

Andrew Lough, business manager for communications and collaboration at a&o UK, offers similar advice. "When considering a third party to overcome skills and resource issues, [resellers should] choose partners that are experienced in working in complex IT environments that can provide deployment, business application integration and support services at the desktop, rather than just at the voice switch," he says.

"Currently, many UC installations are close to stalling point, and this is caused by poor advice from technology focused voice suppliers. The business case for UC is less about technology, and more about enhanced communication and collaboration processes that improve productivity, efficiency and competitive edge. Resellers need to work with third parties used to addressing value through IT service delivery and integration of business solutions at the desktop."

This is a sentiment borne out by the experience of Des Lekerman, managing director of Eurodata Systems, a five-times Microsoft Gold Certified Partner system integrator that serves the mid-market.

When Eurodata wanted to get involved in a customer's implementation and management of a unified converged communications solution, it required voice expertise; something that the company did not have in house at the time.

"First invested in people with telecommunications backgrounds and trained existing staff to understand how new Microsoft technology worked with both legacy and existing voice systems," Lekerman says. "We then trained our new voice experts on Microsoft applications. Basically, we combined our knowledge. We then decided to partner with Mitel, which understands how to integrate voice and data on Microsoft applications.

"We managed to build our processes together with Mitel and we now have a formula for an end-to-end UC solution to be deployed for our mid-market customers. Our methodology allows our mid-market customers to pick and choose the elements of the UC applications they want to integrate. It is not one-size-fits-all: we have to be completely flexible and understand the different customers' businesses and needs."

Partnering with Mitel on the UC deployment has, according to Lekerman, allowed Eurodata to provide more flexibility and agility to teleworkers and mobile workers within mid-market organisations, something once only offered to larger organisations.

However, he concedes, finding the right partner can be a challenge.

"When looking for third parties, it is vital to understand their customer base as well as their technical expertise, and to take references," he says. "The perfect partner needs to have complementary skills and good synergies, as well as flexibility and a proven track record. A good partner also needs to have a confidential approach. We would counsel against working with any third party that cannot prove a service-orientated attitude."

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Enhancing business outcomes

A 2007 Gartner survey of 750 IT and outsourcing executives in North America, Asia/Pacific and Europe shows that 41 per cent of those outsourcing say they do so to enhance business outcomes and performance, with around 47 per cent still identifying cost control reduction as the primary benefit. However, this is a substantial shift from 2005, when only 28 per cent reported enhanced business outcomes and performance as the primary benefit of ITO.

"Cost issues remain strong, and the shift in buyer expectations toward viewing ITO as a means to enhance operations is a sign of a maturing market that has higher expectations from ITO providers," says Allie Young, vice president and distinguished analyst at Gartner. "In addition to cost competitiveness, providers must create a vision for outsourcing that accentuates other business or IT impact to appeal to a maturing buyer set that will eventually seek more value."

On a global basis, 88 per cent of organisations currently outsourcing anticipate moderate or high levels of outsourcing, compared with 67 percent in 2007.

Over the next two years, 89 per cent of North American organisations anticipate outsourcing at high or moderate levels, up from 67 per cent in 2007.

About 85 per cent of EMEA organisations and 90 per cent of APAC organisations expect to continue at the same level or increase outsourcing during the next two years, up from 62 per cent and 73 per cent in 2007, respectively.

Both North America and Asia/Pacific respondents say data privacy/security is the top inhibitor to ITO, while EMEA organisations are more concerned about loss of control in outsourcing.

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