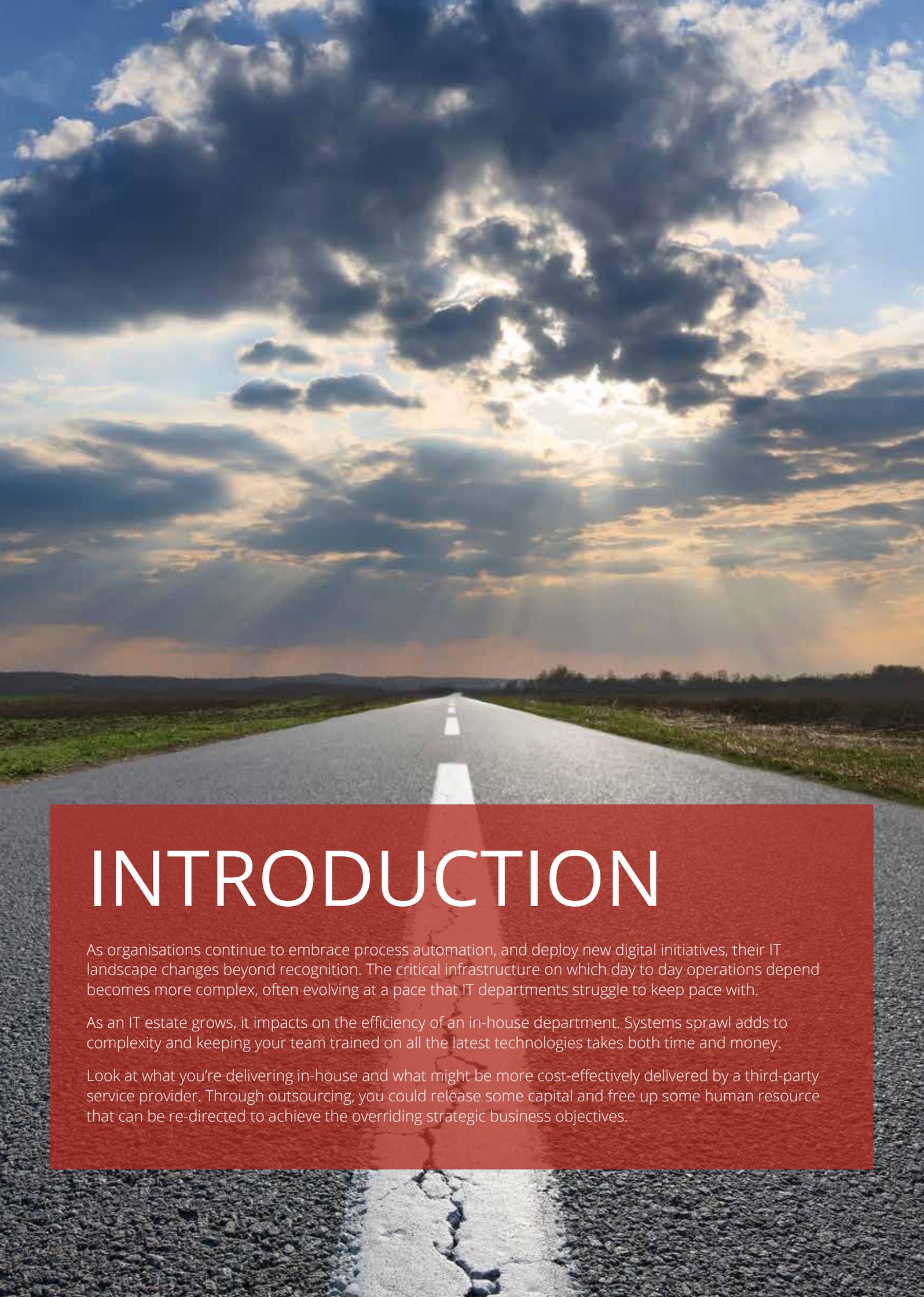# CHOOSING A MANAGED SERVICE PROVIDER

A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE TO IT

ON1

a THRIVE Company

INTRODUCTION

As organisations continue to embrace process automation, and deploy new digital initiatives, their IT landscape changes beyond recognition. The critical infrastructure on which day to day operations depend becomes more complex, often evolving at a pace that IT departments struggle to keep pace with.

As an IT estate grows, it impacts on the efficiency of an in-house department. Systems sprawl adds to complexity and keeping your team trained on all the latest technologies takes both time and money.

Look at what you're delivering in-house and what might be more cost-effectively delivered by a third-party service provider. Through outsourcing, you could release some capital and free up some human resource that can be re-directed to achieve the overriding strategic business objectives.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP

If you want to get the most out of your managed service partnership, it is important to invest the time up front to establish a clear set of objectives and a process for evaluating potential service providers.

Technology has evolved beyond the remit of the IT department, so consider stakeholders from across the business when it comes to objective setting. IT, security, finance and operations will all want input to the final decision, so engage with them early in the process and make sure everyone is on-board.

Your IT department may be challenged with managing a complex environment, one that features multiple technologies from multiple vendors. As this complexity increases it can prove both expensive and time consuming; distracting IT resources from front-line operations.

Work with your team to understand the man hours that can be saved by outsourcing and see where these hours can be better spent on adding value to your organisation.

Partnering with a service provider who offers a flexible, end-to-end service across multiple technologies helps achieve the right blend of in-house and third party support to balance risk versus cost.

Top Tip

Understand the on-boarding process for new services and what input will be required by your project team. The more familiar you are with the process, the more confident you can be that it will make life easier.

The relationship between you and your new service provider should be seamless; they should be a natural extension of your in-house team.

CHOOSING A MANAGED SERVICE PARTNER

Not all managed service providers were created equal. To help decide which one is right for your organisation, you will need to have a robust selection process in place and know what questions to ask. It all starts by knowing what "good" looks like.

Take the time to establish what your ideal scenario is. Think about the balance between simplicity and performance, cost and control. Don't worry if you don't have a clear idea of what good looks like.

Your managed service provider should work with you from the outset to establish a clear set of objectives.

Develop criteria against which you can pragmatically assess different service providers. Look beyond price promises and exaggerated claims. If you are short-listing potential suppliers, it will soon become evident which ones you have confidence in.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions. Putting your technology in someone else's hands requires trust. Look at the small print on the contracts and make sure you know what your SLA includes.

What should you be looking for in a potential service provider? Security, experience and technical excellence should be a given, but what else?

UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE.
Your managed service provider should quickly be able to recognise your pain points and know how to address them.

OFFER A RANGE OF SOLUTIONS.
If your service provider only offers one solution, how can you know it's the best one for you?

HAVE AN ESTABLISHED REPUTATION.
New service providers may look to tempt you with innovative technologies or low prices, but a lack of experience means greater risk.

FINANCIAL STABILITY.
Entrusting your critical data and systems to a service provider should be a long-term strategy, you don't want to commit to a supplier who may not be here next year.

PROVEN PROCESSES.
Don't trust things to luck. Look for a provider with quality assured processes and procedures; preferably to a recognised industry standard.

A HISTORY OF INVESTMENT.
Your service provider should demonstrate a commitment to investment and innovation; so you are in a position to make the most of future technologies.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR SERVICE PROVIDER

Remember, opting to outsource elements of systems management does not mean a total loss of control. Some IT departments can suffer from a touch of "separation anxiety". An MSP whose processes adhere to ITIL best practice can help quell any concerns you may have.

Start by working out which elements of your infrastructure you are most happy outsourcing. Try to be pragmatic about the whole thing. If there are certain processes that are labour-intensive or require scarce, highly-skilled resources, you're better off outsourcing them.

The cost/control dilemma is likely to be the one you struggle with most. If the numbers work, go with it.

If you're thinking about partnering with a managed service provider, here are a few things to consider that can help ease your mind:

1. Explore the full range of services they offer. In addition to the essential maintenance and monitoring services, there may be more skilled resource available that offers a more cost-effective option than maintaining or training an in-house resource.

2. Understand their technology strengths and weaknesses. Which vendors do they support? Do they offer alternatives for all major services and solutions?

3. What level of certification or expertise do they maintain in-house? If there is an overlap between your in-house qualifications and those of your service provider, don't look upon it as losing something. Take the opportunity to retrain or re-focus your internal resource.

4. Get to know the SLAs and how well they perform against them. Don't simply look to maintain the status quo, take the opportunity to raise the bar and deliver a standard of service that suits the needs of the business going forward. Also, if components of the SLA are "over-specified", renegotiate. There is little point in paying for a level of service that you don't need.

5. Security is important. One of the core components of an outsourced relationship is that you trust your business-critical data and applications will be secure. Arrange for a tour of the service provider's facilities and assure yourself that the right physical and virtual security precautions are in place. Look for the added peace of mind that comes from third party accreditations such as Cyber Security Essentials.

6. Does your provider support a hybrid environment? In most cases, your IT infrastructure will include elements of Cloud and on-premises equipment. If you are transitioning to a Cloud environment, make sure your service provider can support you throughout your journey.

Top Tip
Monitoring and management is an underrated component of the managed service relationship. It provides vital reports and analysis of the service you have bought into. Make sure your provider commits to sending regular reports and analysis on service performance, so you know they are delivering against their SLA. Just because your equipment is housed off-site or the service is outsourced, it doesn't mean you shouldn't have access to real-time data.

ADOPT A STRATEGIC APPROACH

When it comes to adopting a managed service model, there is no such thing as one-size-fits all. In the same way that you would tailor your in-house services to suit your business needs, so should your managed service provider.

Don't think about IT as a simple utility. When you are scoping the services you plan to outsource, make sure they are aligned to your broader business needs and are scalable and flexible enough to adapt to changing needs over time.

Your service provider should be in a position to deliver a leaner, less complex infrastructure. One that benefits your business by creating a more agile, productive and collaborative environment. If they can't, then they aren't offering any additional value.

Don't simply swap on-premises for colocated or Cloud versions of the same equipment. Leverage the expertise available to transform what might be an ageing, fractured estate into a seamlessly integrated infrastructure. Eliminate barriers to growth and transform your technology into a business enabler.

Take a long-term view of your IT and future-proof your investment in technology to ensure your critical systems and applications are supported, both today and tomorrow.

Top Tip
You don't have to develop a strategy in isolation. Your service provider should have plenty of experience to draw upon and be capable of playing a proactive role in developing a strategy with you.

This is an opportunity for them to demonstrate they understand your business and how technology will support your objectives in the future.

TURNING INFORMATION INTO INTELLIGENCE

Optimising your data network for performance, availability and reliability can have a significant impact on workforce productivity; it can also help realise improvements in network security and overall user experience. However, the intelligence required to optimise your network may not always be readily available.

Over time, network data can become fragmented or siloed, making is difficult to locate and analyse effectively. The knock-on effects of a lack of accurate data go beyond the optimisation of systems. Without access to the right information at the right time you lose visibility of network vulnerabilities, limit the effectiveness of preventative maintenance and run the risk of a negative impact on network availability.

As organisations have become increasingly reliant upon their IT infrastructure, decisions that affect the performance of their network have become more intrinsically linked with the performance of the business as a whole.

Visibility across the network puts IT back in control of budgets and maintenance schedules. As performance becomes more predictable, proactive scheduling and forecasting becomes easier.

Top Tip
Effective decision making of any type is dependent upon the availability and quality of management information. Systems monitoring is only part of the equation. When it comes to choosing your managed service provider, place a premium on their ability to deliver meaningful analytics.

STAY PROACTIVE

Your IT infrastructure is the vital system that keeps your applications running and your business both operational and profitable. Maintaining the health of this system is essential; if the underlying infrastructure fails, so do your business-critical applications.

As IT has become an essential component of organisation processes and activities, it has become necessary to adopt a pro-active approach to systems monitoring and maintenance. Pro-active monitoring and analysis of your systems provides information on the essential components of network performance, availability and capacity.

Stay one step ahead with real-time, actionable intelligence that enables you to diagnose and address issues before they impact on your business. If an issue arises, the first symptoms will often impact on network performance. If a failure is imminent, the lack of an early warning system could lead to costly downtime, impacting both the user and customer experience.

Staying proactive will deliver benefits in terms of performance improvement, a better user experience, lower TCO and a faster, more sustained return on your investment.

Top Tip
Proactivity works both ways, make sure your service partner has an active schedule for service reviews. Do they make key members of the team available to you – engineers, service technicians? Also, your account manager shouldn't be someone you only ever see when it comes to contract renewal. Don't forget, they work for you. You should push them as hard, if not harder, than your in-house team.

AVAILABLE FROM ONI:

- Managed Services & Support

- Hosting & Colocation

- Networking & Connectivity

- Back-Up & Disaster Recovery

- Cybersecurity Solutions

- Contact Centre Solutions

- Mobility & Collaboration

- Unified Communications

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We deliver a unique blend of on-site, hybrid and Cloud computing systems, from our Tier 3+ UK data centres.
Our workforce holds over 400 accreditations from vendors such as Cisco, VMware, NetApp, Veeam, Gamma, BT and Microsoft.