

CRNtech

NEWS ANALYSIS AND PERSPECTIVE FOR VARs AND TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATORS

SEPTEMBER 2007

CRN.com/extra

INTEL LURES MSPs WITH vPRO, cPRO
MSPs USE NEW CHIPSETS FOR REMOTE MANAGEMENT BELOW THE OS



COVER STORY

RATING THE PLATFORMS

ENGINEERS REVIEW FOUR MSP VENDORS ON KEY FEATURES AND N-ABLE COMES UP A WINNER

As big vendors move deeper into managed services, smart MSPs are specializing, customizing and collaborating to differentiate themselves in a crowded market.

With technology juggernauts the likes of Cisco Systems and Dell migrating to their market, many MSPs are finding they must evolve their businesses to respond to the changing landscape.

While some MSPs see the large vendors' entrance into the market as an emerging threat, others view it as a buoy for a market that sorely lacks end-user awareness and demand.

Either way, those MSPs looking to differentiate themselves can do things like specialize in key technology segments, with IP telephony cited by many as the hottest area for MSPs in the SMB market.

"Voice-over-IP is definitely the biggest area of demand we see right now," said Rob Ross, president of ThinkSmart, an MSP in Gold River, Calif.

Another way they're going about differentiating their services is by providing highly customized reporting for their customers, and many MSPs say that solid reporting is essential for keeping customers happy.

"Every client wants a different take on the same information, and to get real meaningful reports you have to understand what they want and have face-to-face discussions," said managed services veteran Tim Hebert, CEO of Atrion Networking, Warwick, R.I. "Some people think good reporting is a check-

box you click and e-mail to a client, but the value of reporting is taking the time to review the information with the client."

This is also an area where solution providers have an advantage over their larger competitors, which may not have the local resources for face-to-face interactions.

MSPs are also taking a variety of other measures, including reducing their labor costs, offering a wider breadth of services, and increasing their availability by partnering with other MSPs, distributors and vendors.

"Once a medium-size management provider has reached those economies of scale, they can offer their services to smaller MSPs who have a more local footprint but who can't get to that scalability," said Gary Read, CEO of managed services platform provider Nimsoft, Redwood City, Calif.

N-able Momentum

N-able's hosted Momentum System wins first place in this review, beating out two of its fiercest competitors, Kaseya and Level Platforms.

Since last year, N-able has made significant improvements in its rollout features and procedures. When the improvements are combined with two new excellent support tools, N-able's solution provides one of the most comprehensive feature sets in the managed services market.

Under the hood, the system's engine is essentially N-able's N-central software. Now at version 6.5, N-central has been reworked from the bottom up to dramatically decrease the amount of time required to roll out new customers by taking

COVER STORY

advantage of deployment templates. Version 6.5 is also addressing cost of ownership by significantly improving the time to train new technicians.

N-able's technology combines probe-based and agent-based architectures into a single product solution. While probe-based systems do not need agents, any mobile asset outside a network—such as a laptop—becomes unmanageable. N-able encourages MSPs to use probes inside a network and only place agents on mobile devices.

N-able now provides a support tool specifically designed to administer Windows-based machines and devices remotely. Unlike terminal services, Remote Desktop and VNC, Remote Support Manager provides full remote management capabilities without having to take remote control of a machine. In addition to Windows, N-able supports Linux, Novell and MAC OSes. Furthermore, N-able offers Remote Environment Manager, which is a policy-based desktop-management product.

For Windows devices, N-central can do TCP port availability, WMI and SNMP-based monitoring, SNMP trap monitoring, Syslog monitoring, and can monitor event logs, including read text files, and execute ODBC queries. What's more, N-central uses WMI to filter any new software installed on machines. The only caveat to this process is that software must be registered with Windows.

When working with the Windows Remote Desktop, technicians have to disturb end users whenever they need to fix a problem on a PC. With Remote Support Manager, however, technicians can connect to a machine and start or stop processes, read event logs, install software and delete files without interrupting users. The tool also includes a chat Window to alert users whenever technicians need to gain complete access and reboot a PC.

Engineers found that Remote Support Manager is the easiest support tool to use in this review. Remote Support Manager is an attended access tool that works like the LogMeIn Web tool. After downloading a plug-in, an SSL-encrypted tunnel is created, pointing back to N-central. The technology requires no agent

Scorecard

**N-able
Momentum**

- Automation**
★★★★★
- Ease of Deployment**
★★★★★
- Remote Management Capabilities**
★★★★★
- Integration With Business Platforms**
★★★★★
- Ease of Use**
★★★★★
- Management And Reporting**
★★★★★
- Profit Potential**
★★★★★

Four Key Players In Managed Services

KEY PLAYERS	KEY PRODUCT	CHANNEL POINTS
<p>■ AdventNet Pleasanton, Calif.</p>	<p>ManageEngine OpManager MSP Edition has a probe-based client that works on multiple operating systems. OpManager has a comprehensive list of actions and alerts.</p>	<p>Offers sales tools, such as presentations, price calculators, comparison documents, customer deployment scenarios, sales pitch and cross-selling options.</p>
<p>■ Kaseya St. Helier, Jersey</p>	<p>Managed Service Edition is a framework with many comprehensive monitoring features. Highly secured servers and agents are easy to deploy, even on remote, unsecured locations.</p>	<p>Offers a comprehensive set of tools and templates to aid in the transition to an MSP business model, including SLAs, pricing, collateral, e-mail, Web, and other templates and calculators, as well as a variety of educational materials developed by MSPs for MSPs.</p>
<p>■ Level Platforms Ottawa, Canada</p>	<p>Managed Workplace has a comprehensive set of templates from which to configure devices from 41 vendors. Workplace uses an open Web-services architecture to connect to many back-up vendors, including PSA vendors, such as Autotask and ConnectWise. Workplace integrates with Microsoft WSUS and BSA.</p>	<p>Offers free comprehensive, unlimited technical and business training, including everything a partner needs to know to build an MSP program. Partners are also assigned a lifetime Partner Development Manager to help them evolve their businesses to create differentiated MSP offerings. Unlimited technical support from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. EST, including weekend support.</p>
<p>■ N-able Ottawa, Canada www.n-able.com (877) 655-4689</p>	<p>Momentum System combines probe- and agent-based tools, which can cover intranet, as well as mobile devices. Momentum has one of the best remote tools for configuring environments and technical support.</p>	<p>Self Service Portal contains a dynamically searchable knowledge base; online support includes partner forums, online support requests, e-mail support, telephone from 8:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. EST Monday to Friday with 24/7 emergency support; ongoing one-on-one training with partner-development specialist and N-able University.</p>

because the tunnel is only created when users request support. When technicians disconnect, the plug-in will be uninstalled or turned off.

Remote Support Manager also provides basic support for Intel vPro and N-able plans to add complete support within 12 months. In addition to turning power on, Intel vPro can provide asset management information even when devices are off. The technology will improve the way devices are discovered and managed.

Remote Environment Manager's policies are assigned to users, so MSPs can define complete PC configurations once and apply them across entire enterprises. Configurations are enforced, so PCs become self-healing. For instance, if a drive mapping is deleted, Remote Environment Manager will restore the correct mapping after a certain time.

In addition to mapping drives, Remote Environment Manager can recognize printers, maintain security and group policies, change backgrounds and e-mail signature files, and institute power settings.

Because Remote Environment Manager can automatically remediate many settings, MSPs can allocate fewer resources to PC support, which also equates to having more junior staff working on PCs.

N-able is somewhat weak, however, in providing a knowl-

edge base or links to connections to information located at external knowledge bases. The company feels that System Essentials will be providing this information in future Windows OSes.

N-able claims to be 100 percent channel-focused—even in all of its enterprise deployments. N-central can be re-branded and it is specifically designed for those MSPs that are not in a position to make up-front financial commitments to fully host a licensed product and are only interested in servicing small to midsize enterprises using a managed services environment.

N-central is licensed on a per-customer, per-month basis with no up-front commitments and sold through N-able's Momentum System program. MSPs get access to technical training and Q&A sessions with N-able's solutions architects. They also get access to a partner center, which includes programs and tools to help them go to market.

The Bottom Line

While not perfect, N-able is clearly moving in the right direction and demonstrating deep network features that are essential to enterprises. In addition to further improvements in IT monitoring, N-able showed that its PC help-desk support is the way of the future. ■