MSPs TAPPING INTO UNIFIED APPROACH

An evolving software market offers MSPs limitless product integrations from a collection of disparate vendors, but the need for more unified operational tools is in demand for MSPs as firms grapple with technical debt and other headwinds impacting service delivery.

At a Leaders in Discussion roundtable hosted by ConnectWise and IT Europa in London last week, MSP delegates agreed they have had to rethink their platform strategy, with 3 out 4 guests stating they are moving towards a unified approach to operational tools rather than integrating point solutions.

The terms unification and integration are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. A unified platform is a strategy of using a suite of products predominantly from a single vendor, whereas integration involves integrating products from multiple vendors into a solution.

The consensus among some of the attendees was that a unified platform approach can help MSPs enhance visibility and control; modernise their legacy IT systems; and improve customers' experience.

"The whole MSP space is an ecosystem; everyone wants to create open API's and integrations. And over time you see where technology sits side by side, vendors are saying to themselves we can do so much more if we plug them in tighter. We can deliver more efficient and effective customer experiences," said Sam Callaghan, VP of Sales EMEA, ConnectWise.

Callaghan explained that at a recent event, Connectwise outlined an ongoing strategy to take its components including acquisitions and unify them. "It's not going to encompass everything; you're still going to have to make choices about what plugs the ecosystem and which technologies are best-of-breed that can deliver a positive outcome for customers. Those are the business decisions MSPs must weigh up," he added.

Integration pain points for MSPs

The issue with integrating numerous products from different vendors is that "if one connection breaks, it can affect all others," one of the guests explained. "The more

Sam Callaghan, VP of Sales EMEA, ConnectWise

integration you have when integrating one solution to another, the more costly and complicated upgrades and maintenance become."

Callaghan agreed by saying that integrating multiple products and the time-intensive process of having to manage each of those integrations has become a pain point for MSPs.

"MSPs must come to a decision [on] what is the benefit of the integration, and what is it you are going to achieve out of it? At the moment, business owners don't feel the need to solve the problem because the pain of existing disparate platforms and siloed data, doesn't outweigh the benefits of changing it.

"I think it's important to look at your customer lifecycle and see where they interact and their experiences. Their experiences with you are at every touch point and how integration improves their services is an important part of it.

"The flip side is when you map the customer lifecycle to your internal process – what is the benefit of integrating it? Is it reducing messy data or the triplication of data?

That takes time and energy, which ultimately reduces efficiency, scalability, and potential profitability. I think contextualising why you are integrating it and the reason for doing so is critically important.

"The best integrations are where you simply don't have to integrate at all. Our unified management platform, Asio, takes all the products we have and combines them together."

Monopoly and duopoly competition

Attendees agreed that both options depend on what works best for an organisation, but one of the participants warned that "complete unification" could potentially lead to a monopolised market and limit competition.

"Let's say there are only two vendors left to battle it out in the market and they have gone the full unified route. The market is a monopoly; we've got no choice. If they want to put the prices up, they can. I worry about the dystopian future of complete unification, but similarly, we as MSPs don't want to have to deal with millions of integrations at the same time."

Delegates emphasised they do not want a duopoly and monopoly market structure that make it even more challenging for any newcomer to compete against companies with deep pockets and knowledge like Microsoft, Google, and Oracle.

Skills shortage and hard-to-fill vacancies affecting MSPs

Another common theme was the skills shortage with guests stating it's becoming increasingly difficult to bridge the staffing gap.

"It's hard to get the right people. I think it is possible to get anyone, but it's about employing the right people. For our business, it's all about the person. We have got the seats; we just have to put the right person in the right seat," one guest said.

Another attendee agreed by saying the number of vacancies in today's MSP industry outweighs the number of people with the right credentials to fill the roles available in the market.

"In the AWS space, we are going through that whole thing that happened with Microsoft ten or fifteen years ago, where everyone was like let's go out and get some MCSE certifications. It has lots of people in the market that are highly certified but with no experience, so they have no idea how to do their job.

"It's like that in the AWS space at the moment because AWS has got so many programmes where they are bringing in Chefs, for instance, into cloud computing and putting them through courses and giving them certifications. However, if you sit them down and start asking them questions about Linux, which is what AWS is based on, they haven't got a clue."

Skills shortage 'to get worse'

Attendees fear the current skills shortage, recruitment difficulties and talent deficit is poised to get worse over the coming years.

"If you think there is a problem now in recruiting, fast-forward five years; this is nothing. If you think about kids now and what they can do to earn a living, the idea of having a 9-5 job in an office and working in front of a screen is becoming less and less [desirable]. The options that are available to them are completely different to the options that were available a decade ago," one attendee explained.

The group also conducted several polls via a show of hands with an almost unanimous agreement that a unified rather than integrated approach was their preferred strategy for their operational tools.

Callaghan added: "It was thoroughly interesting to hear everybody's perspective on both topics and there are definitely common themes that we can all unite around to help each other become better together."

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