

Redmond Channel Partner

RCPmag.com * February 2011

LIVING SUCCESS IN THE MICROSOFT PARTNER COMMUNITY

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Want to become a managed services provider? Our special package takes a hard look at the top issues MSPs face and explores the tools that can help you reap MSP riches.



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SAMPLE Managed Services Tool Talk

No managed services provider can afford to be without solid business and IT management applications. Here's a guide to some of the top offerings. **By Rich Freeman**

Perhaps the biggest misconception about becoming a managed services provider (MSP) is that it just requires investing in some new software.

“Buying a vendor’s [MSP] tool doesn’t make you an MSP,” sighs Charles Weaver, president of the MSP Alliance, a managed services membership organization based in Chico, Calif. But while choosing the right enabling software may not be as crucial as building a solid business plan, it’s still an important step, he adds: “If you make the wrong decision, it can cost you time, it can cost you money and it can set you back in more ways than one.”

At a minimum, every MSP needs a professional services automation (PSA) system to run its business and a remote monitoring and management (RMM) system to support its customers. Following is an introduction to some top offerings in both categories.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AUTOMATION SYSTEMS

PSA solutions are line-of-business applications for IT services providers with features for service-incident ticketing, time reporting, billing, project management, customer relationship management and other functions. Though there are other vendors, two names dominate the market: Autotask Corp. and ConnectWise.

AUTOTASK GO! AND AUTOTASK PRO

From: Autotask Corp., East Greenbush, N.Y.

Overview: Autotask Go! is designed to help IT services providers with one to three employees get a new business up and running fast. Autotask Pro offers larger companies more features and configuration options. Users can migrate from Go! to Pro quickly, taking their data with them.

Installed base: Nearly 16,000 users at almost 2,000 companies.

Deployment method: Both Autotask Go! and Autotask Pro are hosted applications.

RMM integration: Both versions of Autotask integrate with most popular RMM products.

Pricing: Autotask Go! sells for \$99 a month for up to three users and comes with a 60-day money-back guarantee. Autotask Pro costs \$55 per user per month for a minimum of five users, plus \$10 per user per month for access from mobile devices.

www.autotask.com

CONNECTWISE PSA

From: ConnectWise, Tampa, Fla.

Overview: In addition to being a software maker, ConnectWise is also an MSP serving clients in the Tampa area. Features in the company’s PSA product reflect the best practices that enable its managed services unit to generate an impressive 40 percent profit rate.

Installed base: About 18,000 users at some 1,300 companies.

Deployment method: Hosted and on-premise.

RMM integration: Integrates with RMM products from Kaseya International Ltd., LPI Level Platforms Inc., N-able Technologies Inc., Zenith Infotech Ltd. and HyBlue Inc., among others.

Pricing: The hosted edition goes for \$50 per user per month. The on-premise edition costs \$795 per user, plus annual maintenance fees. www.connectwise.com

REMOTE MONITORING AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Comparing features can be a difficult way to evaluate RMM products because most of today's systems have all the functionality that a typical MSP requires. However, there are a few questions you can consider when evaluating RMM tools:

Is the system agent-based or probe-based?

Agent-based products collect monitoring data via small software "agents" that they install automatically on all of your customers' servers and PCs. Probe-based systems install monitoring software on just one server, then check on desktops and other servers via the customer's local-area or wide-area network.

Both approaches have their strengths. Agent-based systems often collect more detailed performance metrics; probe-based systems transmit one consolidated stream of monitoring data per customer, as opposed to separate streams for every managed server and desktop. That means the probe-based systems require less bandwidth and processing power at your operations center, making them somewhat more scalable.

Is the system hosted or on-premise?

Typically available for a recurring monthly fee, hosted RMM solutions take less time to deploy and require less upfront capital. Be careful, though: Some hosted products offer less functionality than on-premise tools, and the cumulative total of those monthly payments may eventually exceed the cost of buying an RMM solution outright.

Does it support security and backup services?

To boost margins, many MSPs are adding managed security and backup services to their offerings. As a result, most RMM solutions include either optional security and backup modules or interfaces for third-party security and backup products. Some MSPs appreciate the simplicity of using an RMM vendor's built-

in software, while others prefer the flexibility of having multiple integration options from security and backup specialists.

Does the vendor offer operations and help-desk services? In addition to software, many RMM vendors sell outsourced help-desk network operations centers (NOCs) and services. Such offerings can be a great way to lower your staffing requirements.

Which server and desktop platforms can the tool monitor and manage? Probe-based RMM systems typically support most common server and desktop operating systems. Some agent-based products, however, work only with Windows-based hardware—something to keep in mind if your customers run mixed environments.

Does it integrate with your PSA system?

Most RMM tools are designed to exchange data seamlessly with Autotask, ConnectWise or both. That can make managing your day-to-day operations significantly easier.

HYBLUE

From: HyBlue Inc., Seattle, Wash.

Overview: This hosted RMM product automatically checks monitoring data against a knowledge base of some 15,000 possible technical issues. According to the company, that constant analysis enables HyBlue to identify breakdowns before they occur. Indeed, HyBlue says it will pay a customer \$100 if the product ever fails to provide advance warning of a hard-drive failure.

Installed base: Roughly 250 MSPs supporting about 1,500 customers and 28,000 devices.

Agent-based or probe-based? Agent-based.

Hosted, on-premise or both? Hosted.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: Neither service is available.

Security and backup support: HyBlue's Secure anti-virus, anti-spyware and firewall offering is based on software from security vendor Trend Micro Inc. of Cupertino, Calif.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? Yes.

End-user platforms monitored: Windows servers and desktops only.

Pricing: 100 licenses go for a little more than \$4 each per month. Larger orders pay lower rates.

www.hyblue.com

INGRAM MICRO SEISMIC

From: Ingram Micro Inc., Santa Ana, Calif.

Overview: Introduced in October 2006, Seismic is a portfolio of MSP services and hosted tools from leading third-party vendors. Level Platforms (see p. 24) provides the suite's RMM solution.

Installed base: Approximately 400 MSPs.

Agent-based or probe-based? Probe-based.

Hosted, on-premise or both? Hosted.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: Both NOC and help-desk services are available.

Security and backup support: Seismic portfolio includes both security and backup tools.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? Yes.

End-user platforms monitored: Supports most common server and desktop OSes.

Pricing: Startup packages run from \$25 to \$70 per customer per month.

www.ingrammicro.com/seismic

KASEYA MSP EDITION

From: Kaseya International Ltd., St. Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands

Overview: Like many of its competitors, Kaseya got its start selling automated network management systems to corporate IT departments. Today, the MSP edition of its flagship product is among the top-selling RMM tools.

Installed base: More than 2,000 MSPs managing nearly 2 million devices.

Agent-based or probe-based? Agent-based.

Hosted, on-premise or both? On-premise only, though hosted versions are available through third parties such as SecureMyCompany Inc., a Certified Partner based in Encino, Calif.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: Both are available.

Security and backup support: Comes with optional backup and security modules.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? Yes.

End-user platforms monitored: Windows servers and desktops only.

Pricing: Perpetual license fees start at \$12,000 for 100 managed devices. To reduce startup costs, Kaseya collects most of that sum in monthly installments. The backup and security modules are sold separately.

www.kaseya.com

**LEVEL PLATFORMS
MANAGED WORKPLACE**

From: LPI Level Platforms Inc., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Overview: A relative latecomer to the MSP tools market, Level Platforms released its first managed services product early in 2004. Since then, the company has quickly joined the top ranks of RMM vendors.

Installed base: More than 2,500 MSPs.

Agent-based or probe-based? Probe-based.

Hosted, on-premise, or both? On-premise only, though a hosted version is available from Ingram Micro Seismic (see p. 22) and other hosting partners.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: None, though built-in interfaces support integration with third-party NOC and help-desk outsourcers.

Security and backup support: Integrates with about a dozen third-party backup products and another dozen security offerings.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? Yes.

End-user platforms monitored: Supports most common server and desktop OSes.

Pricing: Monthly licensing fees range from \$20 to \$70 per customer, depending on the number of servers and desktops involved.

www.levelplatforms.com

**MANAGEENGINE
OPMANAGER MSP EDITION**

From: AdventNet Inc., Pleasanton, Calif.

Overview: The MSP edition of AdventNet's ManageEngine OpManager enterprise IT-management product is designed to require minimal integration with third-party solutions, which simplifies rollout. The system comes in three versions: Silver, which includes basic monitoring and management features; Gold, which adds help-desk and asset-management functionality; and Platinum, which further adds patch and vulnerability management support.

Installed base: Nearly 300 MSPs supporting more than 2,000 customers.

Agent-based or probe-based? Probe-based.

Hosted, on-premise, or both? On-premise, though AdventNet expects to launch a hosted version in the second quarter of 2008.

ADVENTNET PRICING

Version	Probes incl.	Cost	Additional Probes
Silver	5	\$4,495 per year, or \$399 per month*	\$400 per year
Gold	10	\$9,495 per year, or \$799 per month*	\$400 per year
Platinum	10	\$11,495 per year, or \$999 per month*	\$400 per year

* Monthly pricing available only in the United States

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: There's no help-desk service, but a hosted NOC is expected to be available this quarter.

Security and backup support: Currently, none.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? No, because the system features a built-in, proprietary PSA solution of its own.

End-user platforms monitored: Supports most common server and desktop OSes.

Pricing: See "AdventNet Pricing" above.

<http://manageengine.adventnet.com>

**N-ABLE VELOCITY AND
N-ABLE MOMENTUM**

From: N-able Technologies Inc., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Overview: Velocity is N-able's on-premise solution; Momentum is its newer, hosted product. Migration from one product to the other is simple and supported.

Installed base: Roughly 1,400 MSPs serving more than 42,000 customers for Velocity; more than 300 MSPs for Momentum.

Agent-based or probe-based? Uses *both* agents and probes.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: None.

Security and backup support: Both Velocity and Momentum integrate with numerous third-party security and backup solutions.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? Yes.

End-user platforms monitored: Supports most common server and desktop OSes.

Pricing: Velocity packages featuring N-able's fullest array of software and services start at about \$775 a month for 250 managed devices. Momentum sells for \$3 monthly per desktop and \$9 monthly per server or other network device, with a minimum monthly total of \$48. www.n-able.com

ZENITH INFOTECH SAAZ

From: Zenith Infotech Ltd., Warrendale, Pa.

Overview: Zenith Infotech considers itself a services provider rather than a tools vendor. Its RMM offering comes with remote monitoring and troubleshooting support from Zenith's professional-grade NOC. That enables MSPs to get by with fewer engineers of their own.

Installed base: 1,400 MSPs supporting 12,000 customers and some 330,000 devices.

Agent-based or probe-based? Agent-based.

Hosted, on-premise, or both? Hosted.

NOC/help-desk outsourcing: Both NOC and help-desk services available.

Security and backup support: SAAZ comes bundled with an anti-spyware system from Sunbelt Software of Clearwater, Fla., and anti-virus software from Grisoft Inc., of Orlando, Fla.

It also integrates with security products from several popular third-party vendors. In addition, Zenith sells a managed backup and data recovery solution separately.

Autotask and ConnectWise integration? ConnectWise, but not Autotask.

End-user platforms monitored: Windows only desktop; Windows, Unix or Linux server.

Pricing: Desktop plans start at \$4.25 per desktop per month. Server plans go for either \$120 or \$157 per server per month. At the lower rate, when Zenith spots a problem, it issues an alert and provides instructions for fixing it. At the higher rate, Zenith repairs the problem itself. Backup and data recovery services go for \$49 per month per customer, plus an additional 39 cents per month per gigabyte for storage space. www.zenithinfotech.com *

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