Quick; what do you think of when you hear “managed services support?”

Do thoughts of IT infrastructure outsourcing swim in your head? Are your thoughts limited to routers, switches, network interface cards, servers, PCs, email systems, cell phones and tablets? Is the thought limited to off-shore support? Do you picture a vast warehouse full of call center cubicles with a low hum of phone chatter?

In the past, Managed Services has been most commonly associated with the outsourcing of IT infrastructure support. That was the proverbial “old days.” Today’s Managed Services Providers (MSP’s) offer an incredibly wide array of services – and not just on the technology front. There are MSPs providing human resources services, accounting services, printing services, call center operations, and plenty of other services outside the traditional realm of support for computer network backbones and server farms.

Organizations of all sizes can use managed services support to get more out of their enterprise software application system, and provide customers (e.g., end users, field operations, executive management, etc.) with a higher-quality experience.

What is Managed Services Support?

To keep an ERP system running efficiently, there is typically some level of an in-house support team. Depending on the size, complexity and configuration of the system, this could range from just a few part-time Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), or Power Users, to a full cadre of dedicated technical and functional Analysts. Relationships with one or more consulting organizations to provide ad hoc, as-needed, assistance on projects and other assignments is common also. In some cases, organizations opt to “shop around” each time a need arises. There are as many flavors of building a support team as there are products to support.

But how do you determine when and if to use a Managed Services model? If the team you’ve built is getting pulled in too many directions; when your in-house customers’ expectations for day-to-day support can’t be met along with all the other demands on your resources; when you realize that redirecting existing resources to more strategic and/or tactical assignments, and offloading some or all of the day-to-day activities, will help propel the business forward; when you are feeling you are at risk of losing some of your in-house talent.

Wikipedia’s definition of Managed Services is “...the practice of outsourcing day-to-day management responsibilities and functions as a strategic method for improving operations and cutting expenses.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Managed_services)

"The operative distinction that sets apart a MSP is the proactive delivery of their service, as compared to reactive IT services, which have been around for decades."

The MSP Alliance (http://www.mspalliance.com/blog/definition-of-managed-services/) defines managed services as, “… the proactive management of an IT asset or object, by a third party typically known as a MSP, on behalf of a customer. The operative distinction that sets apart a MSP is the proactive delivery of their service, as compared to reactive IT services, which have been around for decades.”

These definitions emphasize the concepts that a high-quality MSP is not just a reactive help desk, but a value-added partner that helps you proactively improve your business systems and processes.
Managed Services Today:
Not Your Grandma’s Support

For an organization to maximize its return on a managed services partnership (and, be clear, to be successful, it IS a partnership), a full-service MSP should be able to provide support across your entire ERP footprint including:

- System administration
- Technical development skills
- Functional business analyst skills
- Business process improvement
- Support for technical upgrades
- Both remote and on-site services
- Integration support
- Support for your own system customizations
- Support for projects, not just incidents

In addition, an MSP should assign organizations a dedicated support team. This model, as opposed to a large help desk “pool” model, provides many of the same benefits as in-house staff. By having assigned/dedicated resources, IT organizations gain efficiencies through repetition as the support resources get to know the system, the data that resides in it, the personnel and the processes. Plus, the MSP can then begin to provide proactive suggestions for system and process improvement.

Augmenting an in-house team with resources from a high-quality MSP has many benefits over the ad hoc staff augmentation model traditionally used to accommodate peak support demands.

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"By engaging CSS managed services during our North American rollouts, we were able to keep our core project team focused on the next wave of go-lives while still providing quality support from skilled JD Edwards resources to our new sets of end users."

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- While staff augmentation can accommodate peaks and valleys of support demands,
  - Managed services can react more quickly since contracts are already in place
  - Managed services provides a predictable cost structure
  - Managed services provides a Service Level Agreement (a.k.a. response time) that is typically not possible with staff augmentation models

- While staff augmentation can provide one or more experts in the specific subject areas where needed,
  - Managed services delivery is not dependent on the availability or location of specific individuals at the time you actually need them.
  - Managed services should provide you with an assigned team of experts that can shuffle individual assignments immediately based on their expertise, capacity and potentially location
  - Managed services should provide these experts at a significantly reduced unit cost

- While staff augmentation keeps IT departments from paying for a resource when not being utilized,
  - Managed services provides a constant and consistent level of support and provides for proactive system improvement through repetitive use of resources

Finally, managed services can serve as a form of risk reduction insurance. A reliable MSP serves to reduce risk of:
- Insufficient project go-live support, especially in the case of multiple location roll-outs
- Impacts from staff turnover
- Regulatory changes impacting your system
- System stagnation/obsolescence

For more information, visit www.cssus.com.