

**EXPERTS' FORUM** | Technology

## Automating IT: A Smart Strategy for Tight Times

Imagine never refilling another toner cartridge, performing another data backup or worrying about a computer meltdown. It's automatically taken care of and the best part, it costs less than hiring an IT professional.

That has become a reality for Orion Associates, a provider of consumer directed community support services with 20 group homes and three offices serving people with disabilities. Orion is among a rising number of organizations depending on a managed services solution.

"They don't just support our system," said Toni Thulen, chief financial officer at Orion. "They proactively look at what we have in place and how we can make it run more efficiently."

More than ever, these economic times call for a strategic investment in technologies that provide a proactive – not reactive – environment. Organizations gain a strategic advantage by relying on one provider to manage their voice, video, printing and copying equipment and to automate a full range of routine IT tasks.

**Who benefits:** A proactive managed services solution caters to small businesses with fewer than 50 users and no IT staff as well as mid-sized businesses with up to 200 users. "What we found more than anything is that it was hard to find one person to do everything. We now get so much more time than we got from that one (staff) person," Thulen said.

**How it works:** A managed services solution allows IT professionals to proactively monitor a customer's IT infrastructure remotely, identify any issues early and fix them – often before

the customer even sees a problem. Automatic triggers such as low toner cartridges, dwindling disk space or a potential server failure are set up. Once any of the items reaches the predetermined threshold, an alert is sent and an adjustment can be made before the company faces damaging downtime, costly technical support and lost productivity.

When issues do arise, users have unlimited help desk support. Once they call, the IT professional can view the user's computer remotely to fix any problems without being on site.

**What's the investment:** A company can choose from different service levels based on its needs and the costs vary by provider. On average, companies spend about \$1,000 a month on managed services – a bargain compared to hiring an in-house specialist or having a team member dedicated to managing maintenance and repairs of their technology equipment.

Thulen remembers spending up to a quarter of her time helping employees work through their computer problems. Now, it's no longer a concern. "It freed up my time enormously," she said.

**What's the return:** According to a recent survey conducted by Enterprise Management Associates, automation technologies can lower staffing requirements by 50 percent and reduce repair time for system problems by an average of more than 60 percent. That significantly drives down the total cost of ownership of a company's computer, copiers, printers, phones and video equipment.

The survey found that the average company recoups its investment in automation technology within the first quarter or two of deployment.



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