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SMB-friendly IT solutions are needed

Your business deserves more than a cut-down enterprise offering

Introduction

In the 2020s, businesses of all sizes depend on their IT systems more than ever. However, the number of skilled staff available to install and manage those IT systems frequently remains constant, or even shrinks. This is especially true for small and midsized businesses (SMBs), which if you are an SMB, makes it essential that the IT systems you use be well suited to your requirements.

Historically, many of the IT systems made available to SMBs by vendors were either built using less-capable components or were simply cut-down versions of systems sold to larger enterprises. This approach is no longer viable, however. As an SMB today, you need IT systems that are simple to procure and straightforward to manage, but which have the same resilience and security capabilities as enterprise systems, only on a smaller scale. Ideally, you want to have excellent, up to date technology at an affordable cost.

But how can you find that, and what questions should you be asking, both of potential suppliers and of yourself and your staff? In this paper we will compare, at a high level, the solutions offered to SMBs with those routinely delivered to large enterprises and consider how and where they should differ – and indeed where overlaps and similarities should exist.

We will cover the key requirements that you should look for in IT systems. In addition, we will discuss the characteristics you might look for in the vendors and channel partners who sell and support them.

SMB key requirements

Let's start by looking at some of the fundamental characteristics that IT solutions should possess in order to be suitable for you to use within your business, and highlight where, if at all, they differ from those sought by larger organizations.

Cost effectiveness: Smaller businesses are especially sensitive to cash-flow and this means that the systems they acquire must be able to show they represent good value for money. In some ways, SMBs are little different from larger enterprises in this respect. But given your size, it does mean that the systems you procure will rarely be the most expensive options in the market, unless they have special features unavailable in other solutions. That said, you should also be open to using new technology where it makes sense and is affordable. Additionally, you may get considerable investment protection by acquiring the most modern technology, as this could help to maximize the solution's expected lifespan.

Physical scalability: In IT, it can be challenging to initially size a system, especially if it is to support a new workload or one where it is difficult to accurately predict its future usage. In addition, many systems today support multiple workloads. This all means that, once again, small and midsize businesses like yours need solutions that can scale as required – and the staffing and skills issue means it is particularly important that the

systems be able to scale without needing complex upgrades. This can make pre-tested configurations with easy to integrate options attractive.

Functional scalability: As an SMB, you will also recognize that scalability relates to more than just the hardware – processing power, memory, storage size, etc. It is increasingly important for your IT solutions to be flexible and scalable in response to business change too, not least because this may require adding new functional or architectural elements to the IT platform. For example, servers may start off running Windows as an operating system, but a new application may be introduced that uses a Linux operating system.

Commercial flexibility: In line with the physical scalability mentioned above, you may also wish to look for IT solutions that have a range of financial acquisition models to enable IT usage to scale without financial complexity getting in the way.

Implementation and operational simplicity: Like many other small and mid-size organizations, you may not have access to a wide range of in-depth technical skills. In this case, you may benefit from solutions that are simple to get into action, and which have been explicitly designed to use installation wizards or other software tools to automate initial start-up and configuration.

Lack of specialist skills also means you want IT systems that are easy to keep operating securely, efficiently and effectively. This makes it essential to have system management tools that are straightforward to use, and which can automate routine operational tasks and ongoing monitoring. Larger enterprises also find these qualities valuable, but not essential, as they have skilled staff available if implementation and operational simplicity is not inherent.

Silo avoidance: Having a smaller IT support team also makes it advantageous to run systems that can be managed as a whole, rather than as individual units. Look for management solutions that give IT staff a full picture of all storage, server and networking elements, especially if, like most, you do not run a complex management framework solution.

Device quality: This is an area where your needs are at least as high as those of larger enterprises. Just because an organization is small does not mean it has less need for reliable IT systems. Indeed, many SMBs do not replace and update IT systems as frequently as large enterprises do, and if you are one of these then you need your systems to be reliable for longer. Established IT vendors with a history of system and support excellence can be a strong option here, but only if their price fits your budget.

Resilience: SMBs and large enterprises also have similar needs for resilience and high-availability for business-critical services. But only large enterprises are likely to have the specialist technical skills to layer resilience on top of standard solutions without help from their service partners. A valuable feature for other organizations, then, is the ability to add resilience using pre-configured software in the solution.

Important technology choices

Given the features that you as an SMB are likely to find important in the IT systems you use, let's now look at examples of how the generic criteria above are translated into specific solution attributes. We will do this by considering some of the major IT product categories that SMBs utilize.

Servers

Most probably, you run several different business applications and services on your servers. Each application may have considerably different requirements of the system in order to be able to function optimally and cost-effectively. This means that you may need servers to be provided in a variety of forms and using different processor technologies.

For example, these may include mono and dual-socket server systems, each of which has characteristic workloads that may make one more suitable than the other. It is also important to have a range of storage and networking options available, to ensure that each system can be tailored to better fit your service requirements. Equally, such systems should also have the potential to be upgraded over time.

Storage

As with server platforms, when it comes to storage no one architecture will be optimal for every use case. In the past, SMBs may only have been offered storage solutions based on hard disk drives, as there was a significant price-premium for All-Flash storage. Today that premium has diminished considerably, making it entirely practical to consider acquiring All-Flash arrays or Hybrid Flash/hard disk solutions.

Beyond this, you may want to scale such storage solutions and upgrade their storage capacity non-disruptively over time, without interrupting business access. And any SMB must of course consider how it protects and archives the data it holds, especially as data volumes expand. This may make modern data protection appliances combining backup and archiving capabilities an attractive proposition as these can provide a cost-effective means to protect data while alleviating production workloads.

Integrated solutions and hyper-converged infrastructure (HCI)

Ease of implementation and operation are essential in any IT system meant for SMB use. An attractive option may therefore be an integrated system combining compute, storage and networking in a single package, administered via a simple management console. Some solutions of this kind are now even pre-configured with operating systems and software stacks explicitly to support specific workloads and use cases.

More recently, hyper-converged infrastructure (HCI) solutions have also become available, combining these core IT elements into a single solution that can scale simply by the addition of new nodes. Some vendors now explicitly build HCI solutions priced and sized for SMB use.

For HCI to be a good SMB solution, you should ensure that the system offers a diverse range of processor and storage options, able to meet your distinct business needs. A 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to be as practical.

Management

Management simplicity is another key feature that SMBs should look for in their IT solutions. With small IT teams, you need to optimize systems management as much as possible, preferably using very few software tools. Automation of routine operations then allows the IT team to focus attention on areas where IT can add extra value to the business. Some vendors design their IT systems to be administered via a single management software application.

Physical format options

It can be challenging for suppliers to recognize that SMBs vary hugely in size, ranging from very small businesses using only a few PCs, to those running dozens of servers, maybe even hundreds.

At one end of the spectrum, you will have at least one computer room, either in your own premises or in a co-location service provider. In this case you probably want IT systems that come in a rack-mountable format. But if your organization is smaller, you may only be able to use IT systems that are delivered as self-contained units, such as tower PCs designed for in-office use.

So when you go out looking for a supplier, make sure they offer solutions in a range of physical formats – and especially in the ones that suit your needs.

Partner ecosystem value

No matter how good the IT systems are, they are of no use if they are difficult to obtain. Hence, it's important you have channel partners who can advise on, sell and support solutions that meet your needs, something a few vendors can sometimes forget.

Location: It may be important for you to look for channel partners who have a local presence. However, it is also essential that your channel partner can advise you on all of the options you could use. Clearly, they need to have a range of suitable high-quality IT systems for you to select from. After all, no SMB wants to think that their IT partner's advice may be limited because they only sell a narrow range of solutions.

Solution stacks: In addition to these core needs, you probably value a channel partner that can help you by putting together an entire business solution built on top of core IT platforms. This requires your channel partner, and the IT vendors whose solutions they represent, to have repeatable solutions they can put to work quickly, without having to charge considerable amounts for consultancy and implementation services. This makes it important to look for channel partners that use systems from vendors who in turn have a comprehensive ecosystem of technology and software partners.

Managed services and support: Your channel partner may also have a major role to play in supporting your IT systems over their lifetime, especially when they need to be

scaled up. The pressure on your IT team may also mean you look to your channel partners to provide ongoing managed system or solution services, not just break/fix.

The success of ongoing support is becoming more dependent on the IT vendor including proactive monitoring tools that can give advance notice of things that need to be addressed. Examples include indicating when additional processor, network or storage capacity will be required, highlighting minor hardware faults that can be remedied while the system carries on functioning, or indicating software or data corruption that should be corrected.

Flexible charging models: Smaller organizations may be very sensitive to cash flow, which can change rapidly and dramatically. If this is you, then it could boost your interest in flexible ways of acquiring and paying for IT systems. But the range of such options can be broad, so it is important that your vendor and channel partners be able to help identify your best options, if they are to retain your trust over the long-term.

Sustainability

There is one final area to which enterprises of all sizes now pay considerable attention, and this is sustainability and environmental impact. In the past, much of the business focus surrounding sustainability was directed at power efficiency since this had clear financial benefits. Today, sustainability concerns are often far more extensive and are no longer primarily driven by legislation but have become social issues and reflect the views of customers, staff and society as a whole. Some IT vendors have put in place comprehensive programs addressing the sustainability of the solutions they deliver.

Summary

Today it is more and more important to have channel partners and vendors that you can trust to deliver high quality solutions using excellent components and software. And such solutions must come from a wide portfolio, as this makes it more likely that you will find something that suits your needs, not just those of your supplier.

And core to everything is that SMBs like you, perhaps even more than your large enterprise cousins, want cost-effective IT solutions that are simple to acquire, easy to manage, and can be relied on to work. Equally importantly, you want solutions that have been designed and built explicitly with your needs in mind, not those of larger enterprises. And because you expect such systems to be used for extended lifetimes, you need them to be effectively supported, day-after-day, year-after-year.

Many of these key characteristics are the same, or at least very similar, to those of large enterprises, but make sure they are packaged and sized appropriately for you. And as your needs may vary considerably from other SMBs, the solutions need to have considerable configuration and payment flexibility. Lastly, if you are sensitive to cash flow concerns, ensure that you also investigate new ways of paying for the IT solutions you use.

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