Inside Track
Executive Brief

Standardized solution implementation services

Shorten time-to-value, reduce costs and risks, and future-proof your investment

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The flexibility paradox

Power and versatility

The dynamic, scalable infrastructure needed to support business and digital transformation has, by definition, to be incredibly powerful and flexible. From smart server and storage platforms to full blown hybrid/multi-cloud technology stacks, today's solutions are packed with features and capabilities that can be configured and deployed in different ways to deal with a wide variety of current and future requirements and use cases.

The exact same technology stack can be finely tuned to support a specific workload, such as high-throughput transaction processing, complex business analytics, AI/machine-learning or virtual desktop serving. Conversely, it could be optimized to host virtual machines and/or microservices in a shared infrastructure, mixed workload environment. Beyond this, the stacks themselves may vary in composition. The same underlying server and storage technology, for example, could be running a database management system, an application server, or even a full hybrid cloud solution from VMware, Microsoft, Nutanix, SAP, Oracle or some other mainstream vendor.

A double-edged sword

All of this power and flexibility has the potential to yield compelling ROI with a high degree of future-proofing. In order to achieve this, however, the new platforms and systems components you bring into your data center have to be implemented in the right way. With so many configuration and deployment options, each with their associated dependencies, and with the state-of-the-art continuously advancing, even the most experienced of IT pros can struggle to find the time to work through it all.

The paradox is therefore that you want as much flexibility as possible to optimize the solution, deal with ongoing change and generally future-proof your investments, but more flexibility means more variables and choices. This can in turn increase implementation time and effort, and ultimately risk the system failing to meet expectations and deliver against its full potential.

Against this background, what are the alternatives to the pure DIY approach when implementing flexible, feature-rich technology products in a complex environment?

Pre-built, pre-configured appliances can help, but…

Only part of the problem is addressed

Pre-configured systems, e.g. delivered and supported as turn-key appliances to meet the generic needs of specific workloads, can certainly accelerate a DIY implementation. If you go with the default 'out-of-the-box' setup, however, such solutions can still represent a compromise.

Of course, further tuning is possible, but if you stray too far from the standard configuration while optimizing the system and integrating it into your environment, you run the risk of undermining support and maintenance arrangements. Plus you still have to know what you're doing, put in the time, and risk mistakes being made.

The full SI engagement approach

Will get the job done, but do you really need it?

Another option when looking to implement a modern, flexible platform or solution is to go for a full systems integration (SI) engagement. If you go down this route, consultants who bill by the hour will help you work through your requirements then implement accordingly.

This kind of approach is often overkill and cost prohibitive, however, and if you use an independent firm, there's no guarantee that the consultants provided will be fully up-to-speed on the latest technology. There is also the question of whether your team will be able to maintain and manage the resulting system(s), or whether you will be reliant on the integrator for that too.

This brings us to standardized implementation services provided by technology vendors.

The standardized vendor service option

A more focused and predictable approach

Whether you are investing in an open, flexible infrastructure solution or a workload-specific appliance, it's worth investigating whether your chosen vendor offers standardized implementation services. By this we mean the delivery of pre-scoped service packages, generally available on a fixed-price or modular basis, designed to get you up and running with your new solution as quickly, painlessly and cost-effectively as possible.

Here's a quick run-down of the essentials of how focused, product-centric services of this kind can help, whether delivered by the solution vendor or one of its trusted partners:

The why and how of standardized implementation services	
What to expect	*How it's delivered*
Optimal delivery against immediate needs	The solution provider knows better than anyone what the technology can do, so can bring the right features and functions to bear in the right way to meet your needs.
Fast, low-risk and efficient implementation	Deep solution and best practice knowledge avoids guess-work and trial-and-error. This means less wasted time and effort and more chance of getting it 'right first time'.
Better operational resilience and security	Solution specialists have experience with a wide range of customers so know all of the commonly-encountered risks and how to incorporate appropriate mitigation measures.
Solid foundation to build on for the future	A need can often be met in different ways, but the approach can open or close doors for the future. A product expert can help you steer a path to maximum future flexibility.
Assurance of optimal ongoing support	Systems implemented using best practices, with features and functions used as designed, are inherently easier to support, shortening resolution times when issues arise.

Different spirit, different mindset

Emphasis on success with the solution

When we speak with IT leaders as part of our research, we often encounter a reluctance to engage consulting firms in many situations for fear of scope-creep and escalating costs. An unspoken principle is that the first task of any consultant when starting a new engagement is to identify potential follow-on work! An unfair generalization, perhaps, but still a common concern.

Product-centric implementation services driven by the technology vendor itself, however, are generally delivered in a different spirit. Consultants and partner programs in this area tend to be aligned with product groups within the vendor organization rather than a separate consulting business unit. In line with this, the primary motivation behind engagements is to help you get off to a good start with the solution you have bought, and to accelerate your path to success.

Advantages for both parties

From the supplier perspective, this approach makes sense because it leads to faster and better outcomes for customers, which is good for developing longer-term relationships.

This goes hand-in-hand with the support benefit mentioned above, which stems from the fact that it is easier and quicker to troubleshoot and remediate well-implemented systems which the vendor support team is already familiar with. This reduces overhead and distraction for the vendor, while you enjoy enhanced service levels and a higher level of commitment from the supplier.

Enabling your team for ongoing success

While it is not always offered, vendors truly focused on both short and long-term customer success recognize the need for skills transfer during the implementation process. Striking the balance is important here, with an emphasis on the knowledge and skills most likely to be relevant post-implementation, rather than things that are only applicable once during the implementation phase.

The same applies when generating documentation. Whether it's specifications or guides, the vendor's experts can make sure your team has just the right amount of information, rather than being overburdened by detail that can obscure what you need and cause distraction and delay.

Final thoughts

Where standardized services represent the most value

While we have majored on the limitations and drawbacks of DIY exercises, turn-key appliances and full SI engagements, it's important to stress that these do still have their place. Used for the right reasons in the right scenarios, they can all deliver effectively.

However, there are many cases where focused implementation services can represent the better - and perhaps more innovative - option. You may have well-defined technical requirements, say, but be new to the solution you are buying or the specific use case. Or it could simply be that you lack the resources to keep up with the growing complexity of modern IT landscapes. In cases such as these, there's a clear opportunity to reduce costs and risks, accelerate time-to-value and, as importantly, ensure you end up with a system that meets both current and future needs.

About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is an IT industry analyst firm. Through our research and insights, we help busy IT and business professionals get up to speed on the latest technology developments and make better-informed investment decisions.

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