

IT management: remotely does it

By Kamal Nath

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Remote infrastructure management (RIM) in India debuted in the market in 2000 with the launch of remote NOC (network operations centre) services. In the beginning, the adoption of RIM by the country's enterprises has been slow. However, in the last two years, there has been resurgence in demand with service providers like HCL Comnet bringing to the Indian CIO a new RIM boasting of globally benchmarked solutions and processes.

Before infrastructure management outsourcing became mainstream, Indian companies would manage their IT infrastructures internally. However, with the growing complexities in IT, the task became more and more complicated. So, the revelation to outsource IT infrastructure management did not take too long. Yet, the first model of outsourcing that Indian companies adopted was facilities management, wherein the company would build its own infrastructure and the service provider would allocate resources to run it. The enterprise had ownership of all assets and exclusive resources to administer them but at the same time, they remained underutilised. Skill to budget matrix became a complex affair to manage, and domain expertise often became a casualty, which impacted IT operations in the long run.

In response to this challenge, a new trend called the shared model of remote infrastructure management gained traction. In this model, service providers like HCL gave the choice to enterprises to take recourse to its remote centralised IMS services on a shared basis along with other enterprises. (IDC estimates that over 85% of infrastructure components can be managed from a remote location.). The customer was able to get value for money with additional benefits such as tool based thresholding, performance dashboards, process based management, alerting and automated trouble ticketing and finally domain expertise on tap.

The benefits of the RIM service provided by companies are enjoyed over the whole value life-cycle and are not merely one-time cost savings:

Pre-emptive problem resolution: A CIO's ultimate nirvana is an IT operations fabric which can anticipate a problem before the user can. With RIM this is possible through integrated monitoring and advanced correlation tools that can be used by the administrators, who, in turn, can resolve problems in a faster, structured manner. Integrated probes on all infrastructure and applications are provided with an automated trouble ticketing system.

Visibility and control: RIM makes visible the availability, performance and utilisation of each component of IT landscape and gives historical trend reports for capacity planning, root-cause reports for problem diagnosis and flash-check feedback for availability status. Online reporting tools help provide companies with real-time control and visibility into their IT operations. The historical reporting aids capacity planning and investment needs.

Tooling as a service: Companies are provided with the best-of-breed tools to manage infrastructure, eliminating the need to evaluate, manage and implement complex EMS technologies. What HCL offers is an integrated tooling architecture spanning across networks, security, data centre (Windows and Unix) systems, end-user computing and applications. All an enterprise needs thereafter is to connect and jump-start their monitoring and management.

Access to people and domain expertise: The seemingly perpetual skills shortage in the IT industry means that trained systems administrators can be hard to come by, which is not a healthy position to be in when server farms are getting larger and complex. IT infrastructure management requires Unix and Windows experts for systems, database experts, messaging experts, Web administrators and ERP experts. They're expensive to recruit and retain. Plus, training them to stay in sync with technology developments is an additional cost. By

outsourcing to a specialist vendor, companies get a ready base of skills from all of these sources whenever they need them, which are all otherwise difficult to recruit and retain.

The quality edge: Processes are often not well defined in an in-house management environment. Variable engineer skills and approaches can mean random solutions. Most companies do not have defined escalation processes, a readily accessible known error knowledge base along with possible remediation, and standard operating procedures. Remote data-center management is one area in IT where the standards have preceded widespread adoption. The most popular being the IT infrastructure library (ITIL). ITIL provides enterprises with a common framework to implement the management processes and ensures de-skilling. It also protects outsourcing investment. RIM ensures operations comply with processes defined by ITIL and ISO 27,000 for security. And these well-defined ITIL-based processes ensure faster problem resolution.

Utilisation: RIM helps increase the utilisation of operational staff; a small number optimised and shared pool resources can be used to manage several datacenters and remote offices. This gives organisations more time on problem management & managing SLAs.

Reduce costs: RIM offers customers multiple avenues to reduce costs through reduction of under-utilised resources, leveraging operations improvements from working with multiple customers and cross-pollination of best practices, and increased automation by the use of tools that are integrated to provide a common framework.

Help desk: Tracking calls and faults is a vital component in managing IT operations. It allows effective and timely responses; prioritisation and management of all incoming and outgoing responses. End-user's in today's world wants instant access to their questions and many expect and rely upon 24-hour support. RIM provides you with a fully functional ITIL compliant Help desk, integrated with automated alerting from the IT infrastructure. It also provides the knowledgebase which can compile a list of the most frequently asked questions so that end users can find solutions to their problems without contacting a technician.

Business continuity: Remote access should be considered within the context of an overall disaster recovery and business continuity plan. While planning for disasters, one needs to look at the more common situations where the datacentre facilities are intact, but critical operational staff employees can't get to work. For highly integrated supply chains, movement of product may be less important than the movement of information. The same is true for mission critical operations.

As any CIO will tell you, about 70-80% of all IT tasks can be remotely managed. Indian enterprises need to appreciate and understand this so that they can begin to chalk out a business plan that begins to outline how RIMS can be leveraged better.

About the author: The writer is head-India sales, strategic sourcing business, HCL Technologies (infrastructure services division)