

EVALUATING RMM SOLUTIONS

Three key criteria for growth-oriented MSPs

THE ENGINE OF YOUR MANAGED SERVICES BUSINESS

Scalability is essential to the profitable growth of any managed services business. To support hundreds of customers and potentially thousands of devices leanly, efficiently and responsively, managed service providers (MSPs) need access to remote monitoring and management (RMM) capabilities such as task automation, remote controls, detailed activity reporting and more.

Because the various RMM solutions available today tend to approach these functions differently, MSPs sometimes struggle to know which RMM toolset will provide the performance their business requires.

This guide explores three main criteria growth-oriented MSPs may wish to consider when evaluating available RMM solutions:

1. Breadth of capabilities
2. Flexibility of licensing and modularity of the solution components
3. Availability of ongoing support

1. ASSESS THE PLATFORM'S CAPABILITIES

Automation allows MSPs to meet the IT needs of small- and medium-sized businesses in a time- and cost-optimized way. Beyond the automation of routine tasks and processes, a full-featured, integrated RMM platform will enable:

- Advanced monitoring of IP-enabled devices
- Remote management and control of Windows® and non-Windows devices
- Detailed performance reporting
- Device-specific remote control sessions
- Easy help requests through a system tray icon

Remote monitoring is just one aspect of a managed services business. The chosen platform should support additional revenue-building services such as:

- Managed endpoint protection (antivirus and patching)
- Backup and disaster recovery

- Auditing and compliance
- Mobile device management

MSPs should ideally be free to identify the features their business (and customers) require, and tailor the platform to suit those needs.

Automation of routine IT tasks

Automation improves operational efficiency, systematization and technician productivity—for example, by minimizing on-site visits, accelerating response times and minimizing the number of non-urgent calls that need to be addressed. It also helps bring consistency to service delivery, which is especially important as the managed services business scales.

Any number of IT processes can be automated, including:

- Updating patches
- Resetting passwords
- Running defrags
- Deploying applications
- Managing assets
- Checking networks and devices for regulatory compliance
- Updating client device software
- Self-healing (automatic correction of common issues such as full disks, need to restart, etc.)

To spare MSPs the labor (and potential headache) of trial-and-error implementations, the RMM platform should provide a comprehensive set of ready-to-use, pre-tested automation scripts and self-healing features based on proven IT best practices. These automation scripts can tackle a number of specific tasks, including:

- Policy management
- Local account management
- Network management
- File and folder management
- Registry management
- Performance and health management
- Hardware management
- Exchange server management
- Active Directory management

For efficiency's sake, the RMM platform's automation engine should require minimal programming, providing simple drag-and-drop functionality and making all scripts centrally available through a library or technician runbook for easy access and re-use.

Advanced monitoring of IP-enabled devices

Many IT professionals depend on several different monitoring tools to keep their clients' networks and devices in view. This deprives them of a single, integrated, 'big picture' perspective that might reveal patterns and trends and allow them to streamline management tasks. Ideally, the chosen RMM solution will include a centralized, web-based console for monitoring, management and reporting that provides:

- Customizable views of clients and tools
- Task-scheduling functionality
- Auto-discovery of jobs and devices with specified IP ranges
- Control and management of endpoint security and antivirus functions with end-to-end remote monitoring, management and reporting
- Visibility of all activity, including proactive and reactive support tickets

A complete monitoring solution will also issue alerts based on MSP-defined thresholds to enable proactive intervention before potential problems escalate into major failures with costly downtime.

Effective RMM solutions provide a view of the entire business network in a flexible and efficient way, and can contribute to lower operational costs by providing RMM capabilities without relying on open external ports or VPNs.

Remote management and control of devices

A robust RMM solution's centralized management console will also include the tools to support client devices on distributed networks virtually anywhere in the world. Remote management in today's MSP reality must include mobile devices—as well as any other device that is part of the network or workplace environment and used in the daily course of doing business.

With web-based remote management, technicians can remotely troubleshoot and fix issues, manage PC and device licenses, patch desktops and servers, gain control over servers and desktops, and automatically distribute software and scripts to PCs and servers. A scalable RMM solution can allow a single technical to manage upwards of 500 end users without any compromise in service quality—a substantial increase over most MSPs staff utilization rates.

Detailed performance reporting

Professional, standardized reports have become increasingly important for MSPs: as more and more functions are carried out remotely or proactively, they can go unnoticed and potentially undervalued by some clients. Detailed performance reports allow MSPs to show customers the value their services are delivering and how protected they are. These may include backup reports, patch reports, closed ticket summaries, server status reports and disk usage reports—all of which help demonstrate to customers the value of services provided and the benefit to their IT environments.

Managed endpoint protection

Most small- and medium-sized businesses recognize the importance of antivirus protection, but many have come to regard it as a commodity—in part because many antivirus solutions on the market today present themselves as commodities, or are bundled for 'free' or at low cost into major vendors' security services.

To meet clients' antivirus needs in an active, value-added way, MSPs require an RMM solution whose centralized management capabilities include standardized endpoint security for all customers. In this kind of platform, security is fully integrated rather than a price-sensitive add-on, and can be actively managed because it is part of the continuous monitoring carried out by the solution.

In addition to antivirus protection, the ideal RMM solution will also defend against spyware and other malware, and provide firewalling, intrusion prevention, quarantine, content filtering and real-time alert functionality.

2. ENSURE THE SOLUTION IS FLEXIBLE

Gartner's IT Maturity Model¹ identifies five categories of small- and medium-sized business customers based on how each values and buys IT services:

- **Break-fix:** Customer pays an hourly rate as issues occur
- **Responsive:** Customer pre-purchases a block of support hours
- **Proactive:** Customer contracts out key preventative maintenance functions
- **Managed:** Customer outsources IT for a fixed fee
- **Utility:** Customer pays based on usage

Some 80 percent of today's small- and medium-sized marketplace is dominated by the break-fix and responsive categories of engagement—they buy IT products and services only when they need them. Just 20 percent of the addressable market is interested in fixed-contract type managed services.

In this context, it is important for MSPs to be able to reach the majority share of the market—that is, those businesses that view IT as a cost and are not interested in fixed-fee contracts. An RMM solution can help meet this need by providing flexible licensing options and modular solution components.

Flexible licensing makes it possible to provide managed services to small- and medium-sized business customers when they want them—freeing the MSP to purchase RMM technology as needed rather than with a large capital expenditure up front. It also allows MSPs to trial services with customers rather than deploy full versions to show how managed services can address their problems: this can be an important door-opener with customers not yet willing to pay for full-fledged managed services. Once the customer sees the value of the managed services delivered, the MSP can easily expand the offering.

Hand in hand with this is the need for the RMM solution to be modular, allowing MSPs to sell single solutions as managed services—for example, antivirus or backup. With a modular approach, MSPs can meet the needs of break-fix clients with a product that is sold as a managed service, getting customers onto their dashboards and demonstrating value. This makes it possible to sell managed services to small- and medium-sized business customers of all IT maturities—and potentially address 100 percent of the available market.

3. ENSURE ONGOING SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

The prospect of implementing an RMM solution can be intimidating for many MSPs, as it involves not only deploying software but also adopting new business processes and potentially evolving established business models. An experienced, partnership-oriented RMM solution provider can provide support for both the technical and business dimensions.

Some questions to ask:

- What onboarding support is available?
- Are best practice guides available?
- Will our team have access to video tutorials and/or technical webinars to learn more about specific topics?

What happens after an MSP gets the RMM solution up, running and integrated into their business? It is a good idea to look into an RMM provider's track record of delivering on promises before purchasing their solution. Most vendors post information online about their product plans; compare their roadmaps with actual product features to make sure they don't have a history of announcing future releases that end up delivering no substantive changes.

¹ Gartner Research 2005: IT Management Process Maturity Model

MSPs should be confident they'll enjoy a good, cooperative working relationship with the RMM vendor's product and management teams. They need a partner willing to listen to their needs and make changes to the platform to help them best serve their customers.

User forums provide a good indication of the kind of experience to be expected from a prospective RMM vendor. Is there an active community around the product? How much transparency does there seem to be? Do the company's product managers participate in the online dialogue, and to what degree?

LOOK BEYOND THE SOLUTION ITSELF

A good technology company can provide the 'nuts and bolts' infrastructure for managed services. But becoming an MSP—or evolving and growing an MSP business—has other dimensions that can benefit from the guidance of experience. A truly complete RMM solution will provide both the technology and the business transformation services to help MSPs identify, price and go to market with the right set of managed services in the shortest time possible.

These business transformation services may include:

- Access to specialists experienced in operating a managed services business who can provide one-on-one guidance and advice
- Sales and marketing training to equip MSPs with selling skills and custom strategies for their businesses, helping accelerate customer acquisition
- Free, pre-packaged marketing materials such as sales scripts, presentations and customizable marketing pieces (e.g., collateral, web templates, case studies, newsletters, news releases, email teasers, pricing calculators)
- A searchable online portal providing 24/7 access to best practices, collateral, courses and the broader MSP community

CONCLUSION

What makes an RMM solution right for one MSP may not necessarily make it right for another. The most complete solutions will provide all the options MSPs need to customize the platform to their own requirements,

including integrated automation, advanced monitoring, remote management, detailed reporting and endpoint security. Yet those features alone may not be sufficient if the terms of the solution are restrictive. As a result, when choosing an RMM platform it is important to consider licensing conditions and the flexibility of the solution components themselves. Finally, MSPs will want to ensure they have access to ongoing post-implementation support from the vendor they choose.

SolarWinds N-able is well positioned to help MSPs achieve their RMM objectives. The company's RMM automation platform, N-central, is top-ranked in the industry, supported by the business transformation services needed to align their sales strategies and products with the needs of all types of small and medium-sized business customers. N-central includes a unique, hybrid licensing model and modular project offering for maximum upsell and cross-selling opportunities, and is backed by extensive, ongoing support through direct access to product management teams and active user forums.

AN RMM EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Consider the following when evaluating potential RMM vendors and solutions:

Advanced monitoring

With the proposed solution, can you:

1. Support a broad range of operating systems and protocols (e.g., Linux®, Novell®, Apple®, Microsoft®)?
2. See all devices and the status of all services at all customer locations in a single listing?
3. Be alerted onscreen via email or SMS that an issue or event has occurred at one of your customer locations?
4. Set or customize thresholds for events that will trigger alerts?

Remote automation

With the proposed solution:

1. Can you create automation policies using a drag-and-drop interface?
2. Can automation be managed and implemented in a centralized way?
3. Can you integrate with leading professional services automation (PSA) solutions?

Remote management and control

Does the proposed solution let you:

1. Schedule regular management activities?
2. Perform remote troubleshooting (e.g., registry editing, command prompt) without interrupting users?
3. Provide remote assistance to break-fix clients without installing software ahead of time?

Patch management

Does the proposed solution let you:

1. Centrally manage and approve all patches?
2. Third party patches
3. Automate patch management approvals?

Mobility

With the proposed solution, can you:

1. Manage and enforce the security and restrictions of your customers' mobile devices—with Apple iOS® and Android® support?
2. Provide lock/wipe data-loss prevention, geo-tracking, 'bring your own device' and corporate support?

Performance reporting

Will the proposed solution let you:

1. Deliver tactical and business-level reporting to customers, including long term trends?
2. Customize reports using a drag-and-drop interface?
3. Run reports without worrying about the impact on your monitoring server?

Managed endpoint security

With the proposed solution, can you:

1. Configure, deploy, monitor, manage and report on antivirus software from a central console?
2. Pass compliance audits?
3. Perform network scans and deliver vulnerability, configuration and compliance reports to your customers?

Flexible licensing model and modular solution components

Does the proposed RMM solution:

1. Offer a hybrid licensing model?
2. Let you expand your offering with modular solution components and grow your revenue by adding back up and other services?
3. Allow you to purchase it as a software-as-a-service offering or for on-premises deployment?

Ongoing post-implementation support services

Does the proposed solution provider have:

1. Technical onboarding and training?
2. Business coaching?
3. An active user community built around the solution —and is the product team involved with that community?

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ABOUT SOLARWINDS N-ABLE

SolarWinds N-able is the global leading provider of complete IT management, Automation, and MSP business transformation solutions. N-able's award-winning N-central® is the industry's #1 RMM and MSP Service Automation Platform. N-able has a proven track record of helping MSPs standardize and automate the setup and delivery of IT services in order to achieve true scalability. N-central is backed by the most comprehensive business

enablement support services available today and the industry's only Freemium licensing model. Thousands of MSPs use N-able solutions to deliver scalable, flexible, profitable managed services to over 100,000 SMBs worldwide. With offices in North America, the Netherlands and Australia, N-able is 100% channel-friendly and maintains strategic partnerships with Microsoft®, Intel®, IBM®, CA®, and Cisco® among others.

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