

CAN YOU CONFIDENTLY SOURCE ALL YOUR ICT REQUIREMENTS FROM A SINGLE PROVIDER?

THE CASE FOR ICT SERVICE COHESION



DEFINITION OF SERVICE COHESION

In the broadest terms, service cohesion refers to a situation where multiple services or products are sourced from a single entity, acting either as a direct provider or reseller thereof, with a single point of contact or access for sales, support and billing.

An appropriate internal analogy is to consider a single department within a company. Practically, this one department is tasked with providing a set of functions or outputs. It has its own organisational structure, its own strategy and goals, and acts as an individual presence insofar as its mandate is concerned. Furthermore, it requires a certain minimum level of integration with the rest of the organisation, with a definite operational view and plan for long-term requirements.

The finance sector is another good example. In South Africa, most public and private entities source banking services from a single provider. While it may be true that niche services such as financial policies and investments can be sourced from multiple providers, income and expenditure is typically based around a single finance house.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR ICT SERVICES COHESION

These points need to be carefully thought out and discussed before proceeding. Remember that bringing the majority of your requirements under a single provider's service umbrella is a major investment. As such, you should always do your due diligence and consider risks, gains, current situation and end goals.



SYNOPSIS

If the advent of the Managed Services paradigm has taught us anything, it's that investment in service providers as business partners cannot and should not be undervalued. Bridging the widest possible array of services under a single provider's umbrella now allows for better service cohesion and synergy.

Traditionally, such a move was seen as a risk in terms of service support and probability of longevity. However, advances in service technology and a stronger focus on company culture and strategy mean that there are choices for those seeking providers who really can manage all of an organisation's needs.



RELIABILITY

If you are confident in having your requirements met by one provider, it stands to reason that the provider should be confident in meeting them. To this end, the supply of services should be alongside a certain level of guaranteed reliability. While not all product or solution offerings may be compatible with this, it is a better practise to obtain this wherever possible. It also speaks volumes when a provider is able to commit to reliability, both by reputation and by service terms.



REDUNDANCY

Information and communications technology is fortunate in that there are often multiple service avenues which will meet your requirements.

Ubiquitous services such as connectivity and hosting have now become enough of a commodity that not only do you have several types to choose from, you can also set them up alongside one another as failover solutions. Few individuals and organisations make do with only one service channel anymore. Furthermore, you should keep in mind that the more services you have with a single upstream provider, the more functions based on those services will be affected should one of them fail without an available replacement.



LONGEVITY

The concept of service cohesion is by its very nature a long-term commitment. When considering taking it up, you are effectively asking a provider to hold the reigns of one of the most important aspects of your business. To that end, you should definitely look towards a provider with proven staying power.

There are many ways to judge this, some more effective than others. Experience in managed services is usually a boon, though keep in mind that a company still developing these skills may be more motivated to apply them correctly than one which has stagnated. More so than this, however, you should ask about a potential provider's key strategy, both medium and long-term. If they provide you with an immediate answer that includes service cohesion as part of their projected roadmap for the next several years, it's a good sign that you'll be in good hands.

As the single biggest driver, though, you should examine the provider's values and company culture. If the organisation you are considering makes a point of continuously investing in these areas, it means they really are in it for the long haul. Get them to agree that the same fervour should be and is applied to their clients, and you have someone who will make a point of ensuring that both your business and theirs becomes a greater success. In addition, their values need to be applicable both internally and externally – both them as the provider and you as the client need to be able to benefit from their desire to live their values through their work.

Finally, don't forget to ask about the days yet to come. In an ideal situation, the provider should be scoping this out for you before even providing you with a proposal for what you require. By taking your current and possible future situation into consideration, a potential provider can not only plan for your future requirements, they can also show that they plan to help you grow and improve.



EASE OF MANAGEMENT

Seek out someone who will make the ongoing process less complicated. Despite the fact that you'll be sourcing multiple services, make sure that you won't be bogged down with procedures in the daily operations. For example, will your provider offer a single point of contact to help you with queries or issues? Will all your billing requirements be amalgamated into a single invoice, with payment due on the same day monthly? Do you receive adequate reporting and feedback, and are you able to offer your own feedback in return?

Essentially, you are after a service provision that will give you more time for running your business, with the freedom that comes from knowing that your outsourced operational requirements will not only be catered for, but properly looked after. This translates to tangible savings in terms of time, positively affecting your operational costs.



WIDE RANGE OF APPLICATIONS

Make sure that you are going to receive a comprehensive solution that meets or exceeds your needs. The best way to accomplish this is to work with potential providers from the start. Let them help you scope out your requirements and come up with a solution together. This way, there is no misunderstanding about the needs, and you are in the loop about what the individual services will be, and how they form the solution together.

It is also important to acknowledge that there is no provider with a one-size-fits-all solution, nor can anyone give you everything you need without some assistance from elsewhere. An ideal provider will be open about this, and explain that they will accommodate your requirements by not only leveraging their existing product suite, but also by sourcing best-of-breed products from other providers. This is both common and acceptable – relying on entities who are the best at what they do is acutely better than attempting to out-perform them at their own game. The key element is to ask for assurance that your provider will be able to manage the product suite themselves and deal with it on your behalf in its entirety.



QUALITY

It is far too easy to overlook quality among the many data points of service cohesion. Put simply, no matter which specific service or solution you receive, it ought to measure favourably when compared to others of its kind. Even fully custom solutions have building blocks, and their individual traits should not be of inferior standards. Better yet, to ensure higher quality overall, each solution component should be designed from the start to work well with the others.



CASE SCENARIO: THE ENTERPRISE

We consider the instance of a large, 100-plus employee client organisation whose core services operate 24/7/365. They are a long-term client, having sourced varied services from Adept for more than 5 years.

Over the course of the business relationship, the client has progressively grown their Adept service portfolio. What began as a simple connectivity product progressed to failover links, hosting services, a virtual private network, backup solution, custom APN and managed ICT services.

This has been done not only to address changing requirements, but also to accommodate the need for additional skill sets without unduly padding the operational salary bill. Furthermore, they have increasingly opted to tailor the services in such a way that Adept is responsible not only for the management thereof, but also for advising on potential future requirements and improved technologies which may be incorporated to replace legacy systems.

When performance is trended over the course of the relationship, the results have been vastly positive. The client enjoys a partner-style relationship with Adept, as we are invested in each other's professional wellbeing. The client's service query turnaround times have decreased dramatically, and they enjoy a personal relationship with Adept staff members for billing, service provision, support and, where required, escalation and upgrades.

What's more, this and other similar clients have come to recognise that with service cohesion comes a certain level of comprehension on the part of the provider as to how the client's business operates, and how that operation may be improved. The nett effect is that such a client will often seek relevant business advice from the provider when considering a decision which is affected by the scope of services provided. This allows both the client and the provider to consider the impact that the decision may have on the services, and not just vice-versa. Discussing this in details lets the client make a far more informed choice on whether or not to proceed, and whether the provider's services may need to be realigned.

Finally, the service cohesion model allowed for a more cost-effective approach in the long run. Instead of the client passively being upgraded to improved technologies as part of the upselling and new product marketing cycles, Adept proposed incoming technologies upfront. We worked with the client to proactively replace a number of dated services with a new array of products, some standard and some custom, and were able to offer a significant cost saving to their operational expenditure.



CONCLUSION

Major decisions with far-reaching consequences will likely never be removed from business. It stands to reason that more one can do to make such decisions easier to make, the better for the organisation as a whole.

In the case of service cohesion, the ICT service market is finally at a stage where it can confidently offer such. The key elements previously holding this paradigm back have been sufficiently addressed. Examples of successful service cohesion integration continue to grow, and indications are that we are nowhere near a plateau stage yet.

The investment into service cohesion may well be a long-term one, so consider this above all when making the decision.



COMPANY PROFILE

Adept ICT was launched in January 1996 in Stellenbosch, and is today one of the oldest independent service providers in South Africa. To be *Adept* is to be proficient and expertly accomplished. This is what we strive for and have achieved in all our services. Many of our solutions are tailor-made, in order to perfectly suit each client's individual requirements. We thus ensure that our approach is personal and conforms to exactly what is needed in order to be successful.