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There are many compelling reasons why MSPs need to invest in RMM automation software.

As a managed services provider (MSP), you're probably on a constant lookout for technologies that can improve your ability to service your customers, while also lowering your operating costs. With high-profile technologies such as virtualization and cloud services dominating the press, it's easy to overlook one of the most beneficial technologies: automation.

Remote monitoring and management (RMM) automation software is the ideal tool for helping MSPs to grow their businesses while also improving their customers' experiences. Best of all, RMM automation has matured and is much easier to implement and work with than it used to be.

Why Do I Need Automation Software?

There are many compelling reasons why MSPs need to invest in RMM automation software. Many of these reasons stem directly from the inherent complexities of managing a multi-tenant environment. For example, some MSPs implement automation software as a way of ensuring that maintenance and configuration tasks are performed in a consistent manner across each customer's environment. By doing so, it's possible to take the potential for human error out of the equation.

As important as it is to eliminate human error, there are many other reasons for investing in automation. As you're no doubt aware, most MSPs provide their customers with a service-level agreement (SLA) that guarantees a certain level of service availability. However, administrators know all too well just how difficult it can be to fully meet SLA requirements at all times. Automation software can make it easier to comply with SLAs because it can be used for scripted detection and remediation of problems. In fact, it's sometimes possible to detect and automatically correct a condition before it becomes a problem.

Another reason why MSPs need to invest in automation software is because unresolved issues can lead to outages, which violate the terms of the SLA. This not only inconveniences an MSP's customers, but it also impacts the MSP's credibility. What's more important, it has become the norm for MSPs to financially back their SLAs. In other words, customers are financially compensated for outages.

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Needless to say, down time can be expensive. The MSP might have to pay their customers for the interruption in service and may also ultimately end up losing some customers in the long run. As such, it's prudent for MSPs to take steps to avoid outages. Using automation software to detect and correct issues on the fly is a good way for MSPs to decrease the odds of an outage.

As you can see, RMM automation software can go a long way toward helping MSPs protect their businesses against service-related loss of credibility, or—worse yet—loss of customers. However, the benefits to using automation software don't stop there. Automation software not only helps MSPs protect their businesses, it can also help grow those businesses.

One of the primary factors that often prevents an MSP from expanding its business is that the MSP lacks the scalability to handle new business. This lack of scalability is sometimes tied to infrastructure limitations, but more often the problem is tied to staffing concerns.

Implementing RMM automation can help an MSP to overcome its scalability limitations. Automation software can perform many of the administrative tasks and troubleshooting tasks that were previously performed manually. By doing so, the staff is relieved of much of the administrative burden. The end result is that the MSP will have more free man-hours to dedicate to new business. Of course, if RMM automation software is handling most of the day-to-day administrative tasks, then servicing new customers probably isn't going to result in very much (if any) administrative effort. Automating tasks that were previously performed manually goes a long way toward improving an MSP's scalability—and, ultimately, its profitability.

A second way in which RMM automation software can help an MSP to grow its business is by helping with many of the day-to-day tasks that have proven to be the most time-consuming. For example, automation software could potentially be used for patch remediation. This would give an MSP an easy way to verify that all of its servers are running the same set of patches and to automatically roll out any missing patches.

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A third way that automation software could be used to grow a business is by simplifying application deployments. Application deployments have historically proven to be challenging for MSPs simply because of the sheer scope of the project. A single application may need to be deployed on thousands of virtual machines. RMM automation software can be used to deploy such an application, while also ensuring that the deployment process is performed in a consistent manner, free from human error.

While it's true that there are a number of dedicated application-deployment tools available on the market, it may be more prudent for an MSP to invest in automation software than a traditional software-deployment tool. RMM automation software offers application-deployment capabilities similar to that of a dedicated tool, but also provides other capabilities not found in general-purpose application-deployment tools, such as the ability to perform automatic detection and remediation of system issues.

RMM automation software can help an MSP's business grow in a fourth way by relieving much of the burden associated with compliance. The software can perform automatic checks to ensure that an MSP's servers remain in a compliant state. Although MSPs may not be subject to regulations such as HIPAA or SOX, MSPs are required to ensure that they comply with the licensing requirements for the software that they make available to their customers. RMM automation software can be used to periodically compile license-usage data, which is useful for ensuring continued license compliance.

It Isn't As Complex As You Might Think

Throughout its history, automation software has acquired something of a reputation for being overly complex. This reputation is not completely undeserved. After all, some automation products require extensive scripting before they're able to interface with existing systems. Such products may require MSPs to contract with a high-priced consultant just to get the software up and running.

While there's no denying that some automation products are complicated to deploy and manage, it does not necessarily have to be that way.

The most critical step in the process is to find the automation vendor that will best meet your needs.

Some RMM automation products include templates that can be used for setting up automated tasks. By doing so, it becomes possible to build tasks using a relatively simple drag-and-drop interface.

Drag-and-drop automation products have existed for many years, and critics are often quick to point out that GUI environments are limited in the scope of what tasks they can define.

The reason why automation products have received a reputation for being complex is because scripting is a big part of RMM automation, even though MSPs do not necessarily have to build scripts from scratch. Some of the better RMM automation products include vast collections of scripts. These scripts have been fully tested and can be run without modification. Of course, the MSP is always free to edit a built-in script or add its own code to the script library if the MSP wants to.

Elements such as drag-and-drop interfaces, templates and pre-built scripts make automation software far easier to use than it has been in the past. Better still, these elements don't take anything away from those who have advanced skills and who want to develop their own scripts.

Finding an Automation Vendor

It's easy to see why RMM automation capabilities are crucial to an MSP's growth and ongoing success. However, realizing the need for automation is only the first step. The next (and most critical) step in the process is to find the automation vendor that will best meet your needs. There are several factors that MSPs must consider when searching for an RMM automation vendor.

First, an MSP should look for a vendor whose wares will make its life easier, not more difficult. The automation solution needs to be intuitive and easy to use, but it must also be comprehensive enough to automate virtually all of an MSP's routine IT tasks.

Also, it's important to remember that although the software's automation engine is undeniably important, automation is of limited usefulness without solid monitoring and reporting capabilities. In essence, the

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software needs to be able to monitor every managed device, react to situations when necessary, and deliver meaningful status reports.

A third consideration when searching for an RMM automation vendor is whether the vendor's automation routines are based on established best practices. It's one thing for an automation solution to perform a task; it's quite another for that task to be performed according to industry best practices. All too often, automation vendors only provide administrators with the raw tools to perform automated tasks. They assume that the administrator is familiar with best practices and will construct automated tasks that adhere to such practices. From a management standpoint, it's much better if the automation software is designed to automatically adhere to established best practices so that the administrator who's implementing the automated solution doesn't have to spend an excessive amount of time engineering and testing the task.

Another critically important consideration that an MSP must take into account is the vendor's business model. There are plenty of vendors that sell automation products. However, most of these vendors cater to the IT industry in general. Very few RMM automation vendors focus specifically on MSPs. Although this distinction might seem trivial, it is of the utmost importance because an MSP has very distinct needs that differ from a general IT shop.

Unlike a general automation software provider, a vendor who has based their entire business around helping MSPs should have the experience to know which product features and capabilities an MSP needs most. More important, the automation software should already be optimized to work in a multi-tenant environment. Such a vendor might even be able to provide an MSP with marketing materials that it can use to begin generating new revenue streams.

Fifth, an MSP that's shopping for an RMM automation vendor must examine each prospective vendor's track record. Every MSP's automation needs evolve over time as technology changes. Therefore, it's important to make sure that a prospective vendor has a track record of providing meaningful updates.

An MSP needs to know that the vendor is going to provide it with the support it needs.

Finally, an MSP must make sure the RMM automation software vendor its considering has a good track record of responding to support requests. If an MSP ever has a problem with the automation software or needs help implementing a particular feature, the MSP needs to know that the vendor is going to provide it with the support it needs. Every vendor will claim their support is top-notch, but the only way to know for sure what type of service the vendor provides is to check the vendor's track record.

Conclusion

RMM automation software is an ideal tool for helping an MSP improve the reliability of its service, while also improving scalability in a way that allows the MSP to handle a greater number of customers without adding additional staff. Although the benefits of RMM automation are undeniable, the task of finding an RMM software vendor that can address an MSP's unique needs can be something of a challenge. N-able (n-able.com) stands out as a vendor that has developed RMM automation software specifically for MSPs. ■