

>> Economic Stimulus: Combat IT Cost Pressures with Proactive Support

IT leaders must embrace a proactive support plan to reduce IT system risk and gain more strategic value from technology investments.

By Sandra Gittlen

Executive Summary

With the current state of the economy causing unrelenting pressure to cut costs, companies are forced to do more with less and seek maximum return from existing software investments. Yet businesses continue to demand new solutions and innovation even as IT resources are reduced. Companies are welcoming the increased business value, lowered total cost of ownership of IT solutions, and minimized risk that comes along with next-generation support services. Day-to-day activities are transformed from reactive to proactive, and resources are freed up to focus on helping the company reach its corporate goals and objectives. IT executives in this paper explain how now more than ever support services play a critical role in helping companies reap value from current technology investments and minimize risk.

Today's economy is putting a tremendous burden on IT organizations to make their IT solutions more cost-effective and meet business demands without the need for additional resources.

IT leaders must look to minimize the complexity of critical systems that support day-to-day activities without creating mission-critical system downtime. But as the economic maelstrom continues, they are quickly finding that spending as much as 90% of their IT resources to support current operations is not sustainable in light of business objectives.

Instead, IT leaders must rethink their IT support strategy to get more value from existing IT investments. They must use proactive and preventive support solutions to free their IT staffs from break-fix scenarios and elevate IT to a more strategic vantage point to innovate and meet business demands. That is the only way to drive organizations forward.

Proactive Solutions Move IT Beyond Break-Fix Support

Elaina Stergiades, senior research analyst at IDC, says that support for software driving mission-critical business processes is becoming as important as the product itself and therefore must become more sophisticated.

"IT environments are becoming more complex, and deployments of technologies such as unified communications and virtualization will only contribute to that growing complexity," she says. As these projects increase over the next five years, Stergiades says she believes support providers must move away from fixing problems after they occur and move toward preventing issues from occurring in the first place. Stergiades contends that customers are increasingly looking to derive additional value from their existing support agreements, and expanding proactive and preventive support while building support communities can be a critical piece of that strategy. When implemented properly and used consistently, these

programs can help reduce system downtime and help achieve a lower total cost of operations.

It's evident users want their support providers to go beyond basic reactive troubleshooting, otherwise known as break-fix, to offer intelligent, proactive solutions that encourage flexibility and agility and adapt to changing market conditions. They need the assistance of a personalized, advanced support platform to hasten issue resolution, automatically ensure the ongoing health of their environment, and free up strategic IT resources.

If user endorsement is any measure, this white paper will demonstrate that Oracle's My Oracle Support, a next-generation support platform serving advanced online and remote support capabilities, is blazing a path to these and other business benefits, ultimately optimizing existing IT investments. This is in line with Oracle's strategy to enable customer success through minimizing business risk and lowering total cost of ownership (TCO) of IT solutions while delivering higher business value. In fact, customers of My Oracle Support have reported measurable benefits such as 40% faster problem resolution, 30% speedier service request creation, and 25% improvement in DBA productivity.

Mitigating Risk with Stable, Secure Systems

The best way to avoid the potential downtime and security risks involved with large enterprise systems is to ensure they are always in optimal health with up-to-date patches, synched versions and compliant configurations. But trying to do this manually can be a drain on IT resources.

My Oracle Support gives IT managers a single, real-time dashboard view of their systems' health, ensuring they can

avoid problems and mitigate risk—in essence, they can help guarantee stability for one of their largest investments.

The tool also guides IT leaders with environment-specific recommendations so they can yield maximum benefits from their Oracle systems while maintaining a positive security posture, preventing outages and identifying trends.

This visibility has certainly been instrumental to the success of direct seller and nutrition company Herbalife, for the consolidation of its global order management, distribution and financial environments.

Now more than ever, the company must be able to assure its users of a stable and reliable 24/7 operation. "Now that we'll all be on the same systems, we don't have the luxury of too many maintenance windows or too many situations where we can bring a system down, even for legitimate reasons," says Raj Adigal, director of Herbalife's Enterprise Software Administration Group. And they definitely don't have room for error that could result in downtime.

Herbalife's IT organization stays on top of all configuration and security issues by using My Oracle Support portal to run customized assessments of its systems, get targeted recommendations for critical patch updates, run overall health checks, and receive timely security alerts. Dashboards and power views help them quickly identify issues related to their areas of expertise and take timely action.

This holistic view and proactive approach has resulted in a 50% reduction in the time it takes the Herbalife team

"IT professionals are looking for proactive support solutions that can help minimize system downtime and help achieve a lower total cost of operations."

—Elaina Stergiades, Senior Research Analyst, IDC

to deal with the system's health, problem resolution and issue reporting.

The patch alerts alone are cause for rejoicing at document management solutions provider IKON Office Solutions Inc., a Ricoh company. Balaji Rangaswamy, vice president of enterprise solutions, says that without them, his DBAs would have to spend time actively searching for and sifting through patch data and then take time out to test and deploy them. Too often, this would mean being up to six months behind in critical patches. Using My Oracle Support's proactive alert system, the team can get patches implemented 25% faster. In the end, the systems, which are the lifeblood of the company, are that much more protected.

Less Resource Drain, More IT Productivity

My Oracle Support users, including Rangaswamy and Adigal, say the best benefit of software support is the ability to free up strategic—and limited—IT resources. Through self-service problem resolution, solutions that expedite service request calls, and the ability to keep systems proactively healthy, they've been able to chart significant productivity increases.

At IKON, Rangaswamy says he's been able to get his DBAs away from tedious software maintenance and back to their regular routines supporting strategic business investments. "We are always getting more and more business environments to support, but we have to do that with the same amount of people. With My Oracle Support we can do this without overextending the staff," he says.

The same is true for window and door manufacturer Pella Corp. Despite recently losing a DBA to attrition, the IT team has been able to use My Oracle Support to achieve productivity gains without needing to replace the headcount. Pella's Director of IT, Jim Thomas, credits My Oracle Support's efficiencies for keeping his team as "sharp and crisp as possible." Once they've got their staff more strategically focused, IT leaders can further employ My Oracle Support to

help manage projects overall and foster a tighter relationship between business goals and IT resources. Thomas, who is not part of the hands-on technical team, uses his personalized dashboard to check on service requests, their categories and creators. It gives him a bird's-eye view of his team's workload and enables him to either revisit business processes or juggle projects accordingly. My Oracle Support's project management capabilities promote a tight-knit relationship between business and IT.

At Herbalife, IT holds an equal partnership with the business, and together they have hundreds of projects in the pipeline. "We use My Oracle Support to manage and track everything we have to do in terms of inventory, configuration, issue reporting and information transfers," Adigal says.

Speeding Up Problem Resolution

For most IT teams, there is no bigger frustration during a crisis than wasting time on a service call bringing a support agent up to speed on the system environment—especially when each minute drains money directly from the bottom line. My Oracle Support enables IT teams to share dynamic system configuration data with support agents in real time and avoid the initial back-and-forth involved in most service calls.

It's a capability that has translated into real savings for Pella. Before tapping into My Oracle Support's integrated service workflow, Thomas estimates it would take his IT team 30 to 45 minutes to supply support agents with enough system details to begin addressing the issue. In a crisis situation, where the manufacturing systems were truly down, that was at least 30 to 45 minutes that directly impacted Pella's ability to ship windows and doors, Thomas says. "If I can't print a shipping label at the end of a line, things can stack up for a certain period of time. If it takes more than that time frame, then it starts incurring manufacturing costs and overtime hours," he says. Using My Oracle Support, Pella has stripped that initial "get out of the gates" time to less than 15 minutes, a savings Thomas says he can quantify with an always-rolling production line.

At IKON, My Oracle Support's positive effect on the bottom line is also clearly visible. With only 23 database administrators to support more than 50 application/database environments, it is imperative service calls go as efficiently as possible. Before

800,000 solution articles that cover more than 3,000 products as well as access to industry best practices and peer communities. Some users have reported problem resolution success rates of 97% just by querying the knowledgebase. Others

“My Oracle Support gives us a holistic view of our systems. In a single snapshot we have insight into critical patches and system health, which has reduced issue resolution time by 50%.”

—Raj Adigal, Director, Enterprise Software Administration Group, Herbalife

implementing My Oracle Support, IKON's Rangaswamy says his team would have to go through three or four handshakes to determine which direction to take a service call. With 400 to 500 requests pouring into IKON's internal application support desk monthly, this scenario quickly became unmanageable.

Now, IKON uses My Oracle Support to set up standardized templates to track and route requests quickly, ensuring that no time is wasted on deciding a call's path and priority. Rangaswamy predicts that eliminating this handshake chatter will reduce the effort required to resolve problems by at least 20%. My Oracle Support also moves organizations out of the realm of “hunt and gather” when it comes to service requests—a highly time-consuming task. Rather than having to collect IT systems information manually, My Oracle Support leverages its configuration management capabilities to automatically populate service request fields. The configuration manager includes details on installed patches; deployment platforms, dates and versions; deployed components and applications; content of configuration files; and information about network configurations.

For one large university, using My Oracle Support has resulted in a drop from days to minutes needed to generate each request. In some cases, problems can be avoided altogether through My Oracle Support's self-service capabilities. For instance, My Oracle Support boasts a knowledge base of

say they've been able to tackle tough situations by posting questions to product forums within the Web 2.0 Support Community—moderated by Oracle Support experts.

Ready for the Recovery

As the IT executives cited in this paper have found, a proactive service and support function is not just a band-aid for the poor economy. Instead, it is an ongoing and essential part of their comprehensive support strategy. They know that today's enormous expectations of IT agility in supporting new business initiatives will not cease when the economy recovers. If anything, these demands will ratchet up even higher.

Therefore, IT organizations must embrace proactive support to ensure that mission-critical solutions remain highly reliable and that problem resolution is significantly expedited. They must also guarantee that users operate at the greatest level of productivity and that applications deliver the most ROI possible at the lowest TCO. In essence, proactive support tools help companies continue to innovate at a lower cost and with less risk than ever before. Counting on proactive support as an important pillar also enables IT to move from purely break-fix to become a strategic partner in the business.

For the IT executives in this paper and across a broad swath of company types and sizes, Oracle's My Oracle Support has

already proven to measurably reduce downtime, sharply decrease internal support burdens, and serve as an early warning system of potential problems—among myriad other business benefits. Most important, in an economic downturn, customers say My Oracle Support has helped them achieve their primary goals of optimizing the value of their existing system investments while minimizing overall risk.

My Oracle Support is clearly a support solution deserving

the attention of any organization seeking to proactively avoid problems and deliver the most consistent system reliability in the most efficient way.

For more information on how to get started with Oracle's My Oracle Support, go to www.oracle.com/support. <<

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