

Expert Guide

FOR INTEGRATORS AND SOLUTION PROVIDERS

New Revenue Generators for Your MSP Portfolio

Inside

Channel pros who want to stay ahead of competitors continually look to add new solutions and services to their portfolio.

This Expert Guide highlights some emerging opportunities, such as developing edge computing solutions, becoming a Power BI expert, offering managed print for the hybrid workplace, and providing location-based IoT services. In addition, a cloud and managed services provider shares how he disruption-proofs his business by keeping an eye toward the future.

GETTING TO THE EDGE

Channel pros who want to offer edge computing solutions will have to acquire skills outside their traditional lane and be able to explain the business benefits to SMB customers.

LOCATION-BASED IoT

Location-based IoT services may be the most horizontal of all IoT opportunities, so there's prospects aplenty for channel pros.

POWER BI PRO TIPS

Power BI projects are never done because clients keep asking for more once they see the strategic benefits of data visualization.

MANAGED PRINT FOR THE HYBRID WORKPLACE

Industry research indicates work-related at-home printing is here to stay, and a cloud-first model is emerging to offer flexibility and address security issues.

DISRUPTION-PROOFING YOUR BUSINESS

PointClick aims to build resilience for itself and its clients by staying ahead of technology trends and focusing on a value differential.

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CHANNEL PROS WHO WANT TO OFFER EDGE COMPUTING SOLUTIONS WILL HAVE TO ACQUIRE SKILLS OUTSIDE THEIR TRADITIONAL LANE AND BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN THE BUSINESS BENEFITS TO SMB CUSTOMERS. BY COLLEEN FRYE

GETTING TO THE EDGE



ACCORDING TO GARTNER, some 10% of business data is created and processed outside a traditional data center or cloud at present, a figure that will rise to 75% by 2025. That means the “edge” is increasingly where the action is in IT. Edge computing is all about bringing compute and data closer to the user, with the goal of delivering real-time intelligence to help businesses increase efficiency

and competitive advantage.

Channel pros who want to get in on this action, however, will have to acquire new skills, develop vertical expertise or look to partner, and learn to explain the business benefits to their SMB customers.

If that sounds like a high mountain to climb, the reward is worth it, according to Sam Barhoumeh, founder and CEO of Ready Networks, an 80-person global cloud MSP

headquartered in North Palm Beach, Fla. “There’s a lot of benefits that the customer can get with [edge computing],” he says. “From an MSP standpoint, it stands to be a great revenue-generating vehicle for them as well.”

In 2020, the edge computing market was valued at \$2.28 billion, according to Market-sandMarkets, and is expected to reach nearly \$11 billion by 2026, with a CAGR of 29.4%.

ILLUSTRATION: MAKEEV / ISTOCK

Driving this growth is the adoption of the Internet of Things, sensors and data analysis tools, artificial intelligence and machine learning, and other technological innovations that are delivering performance and productivity gains for enterprises across industries, MarketsandMarkets reports.

Barhoumeh puts it simply: “The primary purpose of edge computing is to actually simplify the customer service experience and allow things to happen faster, in a shorter period of time.”

Edge computing “helps reduce a lot of latency between the time that your data needs to get from point A to point B,” explains Chuck Ma, director of cloud strategy at Buchanan Technologies, a 750-person MSP in Grapevine, Texas. “It also can be a little bit more reliable, because now you’re not having to go through so many hops.”

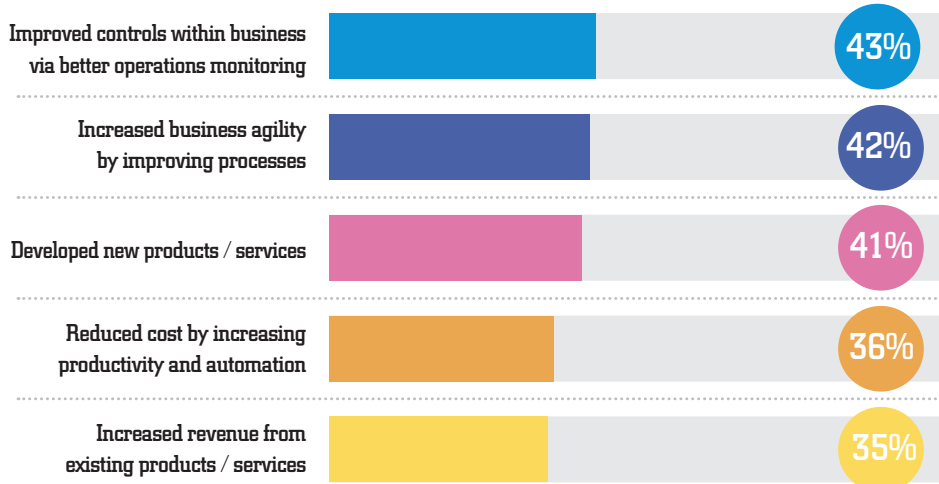
Ideal use cases for edge computing involve data that is urgent or business critical, explains Stephanie Atkinson, CEO and founder of market research firm Compass Intelligence. These include equipment maintenance and predictive failure, public safety communications, cold chain assets, health-care, call centers, and more. She adds that not every application requires edge computing, and not all data being collected requires immediate attention. Rather, the focus should be on “things that are very vital or critical to my business, to my operations, to providing good customer service,” she says, adding that “we have to become smarter around the data that we *do* think is important for our business.”

Is Edge for SMBs?

With many technological innovations, larger enterprises are the early adopters, but recent research from Techaisle finds that about 74% of SMBs are investing in edge, and “99% of them have prioritized cloud, and edge is an extension of that cloud,” says Anurag Agrawal, the analyst firm’s founder and chief global analyst.

Techaisle calls edge “the glue that optimizes and empowers distributed work environments.” Agrawal says that SMBs who deploy edge technologies to improve customer experience or achieve better cost efficiency

SMBs INVESTED IN EDGE SOLUTIONS EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANT BUSINESS BENEFITS



SOURCE: TECHAISLE

are finding some unexpected benefits too. According to his research, these include improved controls through better operations monitoring, increased business agility by improving processes, developing new products and services, lower costs through increased productivity and automation, and higher revenue from existing products and services (see above chart). “So that makes it extremely, extremely beneficial for the innovative and forward-looking SMBs,” Agrawal says.

However, he says one of the biggest gating factors for SMBs adopting edge solutions are the traditional IT providers they turn to for guidance. Most channel pros “have limited expertise as to what is really edge. Edge is that amorphous category. It’s a PC, it’s cloud, it’s security, and everything else.”

One issue is that vendors in the edge computing market have not focused their attention on the SMB customer, Agrawal contends. “Therefore, they have not imparted that training and education to their channel partners, and when the channel partners are not equipped with the training and the architecture of the product solution, then they are unable to go and advise the SMB customer.”



SAM BARHOUMEH

The Challenges

Edge computing solutions are typically vertically focused, Agrawal says, but many channel pros aren’t. “For example,” he says, “retail organizations that are integrating video cameras with a point-of-sale solution ... are not going to your typical MSP, whose primary job is to deploy solutions at scale. They’re going to specific, retail-focused partners who understand the business process.” IT shops that build vertical solutions, he says, are usually midsize to larger firms.

Barhoumeh agrees that delving into the edge is “not everyone’s cup of tea, No. 1, but more importantly, it’s slightly outside of the MSP range.”

Moreover, most edge computing solutions are highly customized, says Ma. “It’s not like a cookie-cutter solution where you can say, ‘OK, we did this for Company A, let’s just automatically bring this to Company B.’ Those types of solutions need to be adjusted to really fit their specific needs.”

User education is also a challenge, says Agrawal, who stresses that SMBs need to understand what they are trying to achieve with an edge deployment. “If the SMB is unable to really understand what the data is telling them at the edge, then no amount of investment is going to really help them.”

Then there’s the deployment challenge of rearchitecting a customer’s network and

applications to take advantage of the edge computing paradigm, Ma adds. “If it’s a big change on the networking side then that’s going to clearly be an issue for some companies to make that adjustment.”

The issues are complex, says Agrawal. “Now your data is being distributed, how do you manage that then? Security is a challenge. And the skill set is obviously one of the biggest challenges.”

Skills You Will Need

Agrawal says MSPs will need two essential skill sets: analytics and the ability to architect a solution “that connects with the business pain point of the SMB customer.”

Barhoumeh looks for employees who have some software development and scripting skills and familiarity with programming languages like Python, as well as someone who has “a traditional understanding of LAN architecture but can speak to the narrative of virtualized architecture within the cloud hyperscalers of today.” For example, he explains, “Can the technician who understands the Cisco ASA firewall take the ASA, or their virtual instance of that firewall, and set it up and tie it into that hyperscaler architecture the same way that he would have been able to do it when they were setting it up physically in the data center?”

On the data side, Barhoumeh looks for ETL skills. “As partners work with clients on edge computing that have a significant amount of data, that data needs to be tracked and that data needs to live in either a container or some sort of data warehouse. The data ETL method is basically the transport vehicle moving that data from one location to the other and then bringing

it back.” The data analysts must also know how to speak to application developers, he adds, as an edge solution has complex interdependencies.

Ma agrees. “You might have somebody who’s very good in the development side, but then you need to augment their knowledge in terms of understanding how to develop from an edge computing and an edge cloud perspective, because that’s a different way of architecting a solution.”



CHUCK MA

Getting Started

MSPs should start by familiarizing themselves with the edge computing device providers and explore their educational material, advises Ma. He also recommends gaining knowledge about the public cloud infrastructure providers “because you’re going to get a combination of those, typically, to create your edge computing solution.”

Agrawal suggests four steps. Start by understanding your strengths and identifying customers who could benefit from an edge solution. Then identify your vendor partners, create a proof of concept for targeted customers, and develop a road map of where you want to go with this line of business.

If you don’t have or can’t afford the necessary skill sets, Agrawal advises, partner with other providers. “It becomes a collaborative ecosystem,” he says. “We are seeing a lot happening in the market today.”

Atkinson adds that deep industry expertise or knowledge about an individual business is critical. “Customers are going to get

it. The [providers] that come in and say we have this edge computing solution, that it’s going to do this blanket real high-level thing for your business, and it doesn’t really apply—those the ones you’ve got to worry about it.” The MSPs who will achieve success are those that “really work hard to understand you as an industry or even as a company and what you’re dealing with.”

Looking Ahead

It’s still somewhat early days for edge computing. According to Gartner, “Edge computing solutions will shake out over the next five years. Over time, ideal niche solutions with limited market and profit opportunity for the suppliers will be replaced by more general-purpose solutions that have greater market opportunity and more sustainable business models. Edge computing is broad enough to support many submarkets, but it will evolve from today’s thousands of often custom patterns to dozens of viable patterns, and cloud providers will take a larger and larger role.”

Buchanan’s Ma agrees that the conversation is just beginning. “There’s a buzz and people are talking about it. So now I think CIOs and directors of IT are going, ‘OK, I’ve heard about this concept. How can my business use this to make things more competitive?’”

For the channel pro working with sub-100 employee businesses, Barhoumeh says, the questions to consider are: Can you support, enhance, and help grow that customer’s business through sensors and technologies? And can you take that distributed model and break it up into an edge computing environment? “The methodology,” he stresses, “is completely achievable from small to medium to large business.”

READER ROI

- **EDGE COMPUTING** brings data and compute closer to users to deliver real-time business intelligence and operational improvements.
- **SKILLS REQUIRED** include data analytics, ETL, and programming, as well as software architecture, cloud, IoT, and vertical expertise—often outside a traditional IT provider’s lane.
- **CHANNEL PROS CAN** get in on the action through vendor education, developing deep knowledge of a customer’s business, hiring the needed skill sets, and/or partnering.

EDGE COMPUTING IN ACTION: CALL CENTER

READY NETWORKS developed an edge computing solution for an insurance company based in Italy that had acquired a number of smaller firms in the U.S. The solution involved moving its call center application to Amazon Web Services and leveraging natural language processing (NLP) to automatically route calls that come into an 800 number to the appropriate call center.

“So, we took NLP, a series of [Lambda scripts](#) and technologies, and built an AWS framework that was distributed over AWS architecture,” explains Sam Barhoumeh of Ready Networks. From a network latency perspective, Ready Networks designed the data warehouse and framework so that all workloads were as close to the consumer as possible.

“Whenever an inbound call came in from the East Coast versus West that call traffic was routed through an intelligent application load balancer and directed to the appropriate region. When you [the caller] got handed off to the live agent, that agent knew a lot of information that you provided the automation behind it in real time. The outcome for the customer is better customer service, so less wait time and less compute because it’s distributed.”

In addition, he says, “The application itself was driving data around data metrics, so we can actually use Lambda and the databases behind it to make other determinations based on analytics.”

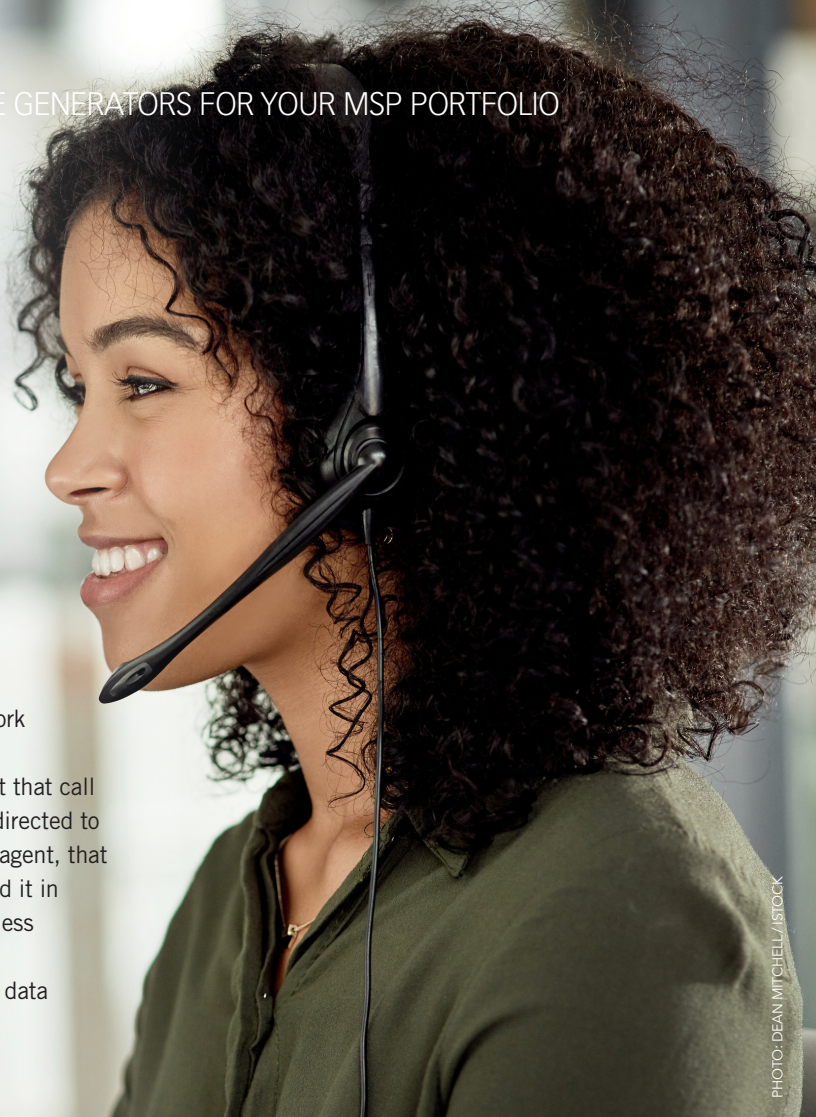


PHOTO: DEAN MITCHELL/ISTOCK

EDGE COMPUTING IN ACTION: FOOD STORAGE

A FOOD STORAGE COMPANY turned to its MSP, Buchanan Technologies, to develop a more efficient way to ensure its freezers maintained a safe temperature range. “They had some sensors that were built into their refrigeration devices. ... It just provided raw data that needed to be transformed into information,” explains Buchanan’s Chuck Ma. “So, if you’re giving me a 5 or 7 or 9, what does that mean. And then from there we need to process that and turn that into an alert or notification,” enabling the plant manager to take action.

Buchanan developed an edge solution that monitored data from the on-site SQL database server via a cloud API. When the temperature range became unacceptable the application sent a PSTN call to the plant manager. “Email was going to be too slow, and the technology they had at the time was a phone,” Ma says.

The solution did require programming. “That’s typically what we see,” he notes. “There’s got to be some kind of development efforts because you’re taking something that was done in a more traditional fashion, and now you’re trying to change it to really take advantage of the edge.”

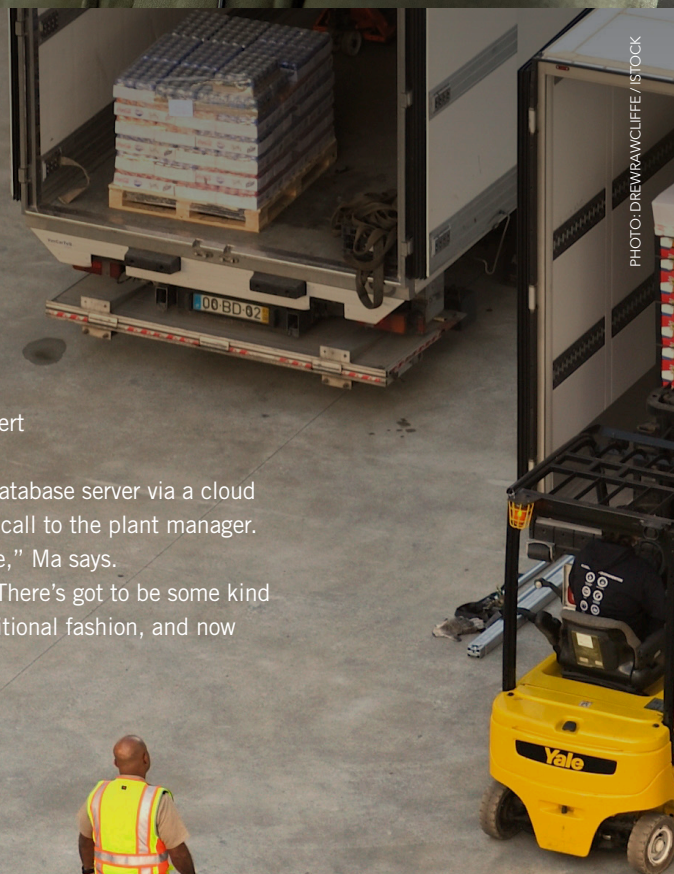


PHOTO: DREW RAWCLIFFE/ISTOCK

Location-based IoT

Location-based IoT services may be the most horizontal of all IoT opportunities, so there's prospects aplenty for channel pros. **By James E. Gaskin**

COMPANIES HAVE BEEN TRACKING assets for decades, but the availability of inexpensive sensors and the networks to connect them—important components of the Internet of Things—are driving an explosion in location-based services (LBS). For integrators, LBS cuts a wide swath of opportunity. “LBS is a horizontal solution/service that can be applied in nearly every vertical market,” says James Brehm, technology evangelist and founder of consulting and market firm James Brehm & Associates.

When you hear “supply chain,” think LBS. “Asset tracking of portable, high-value products is a particularly good fit for location-based IoT,” says Daniel Marcq, director of electrical engineering at Bresslergroup, an innovation design and product development firm in Philadelphia.

Industries in which LBS is gaining popularity include transportation, construction, medical, and agriculture, according to Marcq, who has designed products to locate items ranging from wheelchairs in hospitals to 20-ton construction equipment.

Mario Proietti, co-founder and CEO of LocationSmart, a location-as-a-service provider in Carlsbad, Calif., also helps construction companies by tracking equipment that goes into construction offices. “The offices rarely move, but you need to know if the right part has been put into the right office,” he says.

LocationSmart also tracks the location of smart phones for online gaming purposes. “Forty states offer some level of online betting, verifying users are within the state, or sometimes within a certain county,” says Proietti.

LBS solutions may also monitor things like temperature, shock, moisture, or more. The COVID-19 vaccine supply chain, for instance, tracks not just location but the temperatures of each parcel shipped.

“Asset tracking of portable, high-value products is a particularly good fit for location-based IoT.”



DANIEL MARCQ

Director, Electrical Engineering, Bresslergroup

The components of an LBS solution include sensors, power, and connectivity, and you may have to make trade-offs depending upon your goals. For instance, the more data you want from a sensor and the more often you communicate with it, the more power you use. The most common network options for mobile IoT devices are, in order of reach, Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, LoRaWAN, and GPS. The first two are popular consumer options, because everyone supports them already. LoRaWAN requires the least power, and “GPS sucks battery power, but it can remain dormant,” says Proietti, who has plenty of experience with the problems GPS can present.

“You can’t see the GPS satellites from inside a building or a container, and GPS tags on containers will be blocked by other containers stacked on top,” he explains. LocationSmart triangulates Wi-Fi access points or cellular data towers for location information when GPS can’t connect.

As a location service, LocationSmart

brings in data from tracked IoT devices across any and all networks available, presents that data on a dashboard with customizable reports, and provides it to the vendor using its products.

Managing that data is the part of the LBS project that integrators often forget about, says Marcq. “Integrators are surprised at how complex it gets to mine the data they’ll get,” but that’s what customers need. “For example, a herd of cattle with location tags connecting over a private LoRaWAN network will create a big data problem,” if you don’t know how to glean business intelligence from it, he explains.

Integrators interested in offering LBS should look to solve needs for their existing customers, many of whom may own, sell, or use expensive items that are mobile and need to be tracked. For instance, many companies build schedules around materials deliveries, says Proietti, so knowing exactly where a shipment is and when it will arrive dictates personnel time. Also, when sending finished products, companies often track packages to stop thefts and delivery disputes.

“Define exactly what the customer needs,” suggests Marcq. “What is the end goal? Who gets the data? How is the data collected? Displayed?” He acknowledges this may sound difficult at first, but there are plenty of techniques for getting the job done. “Integrators have the ability to provide cloud logins and networking of the kinds needed for LBS. They have a good idea of how data moves, so they can get the data back, collecting and maintaining the important data.”

Proietti notes that this is a growing market, “and LBS will continue to grow.”

JAMES E. GASKIN is a ChannelPro contributing editor and former reseller in the Dallas area.

Power BI projects are never done because clients keep asking for more once they see the strategic benefits of data visualization.

By James E. Gaskin

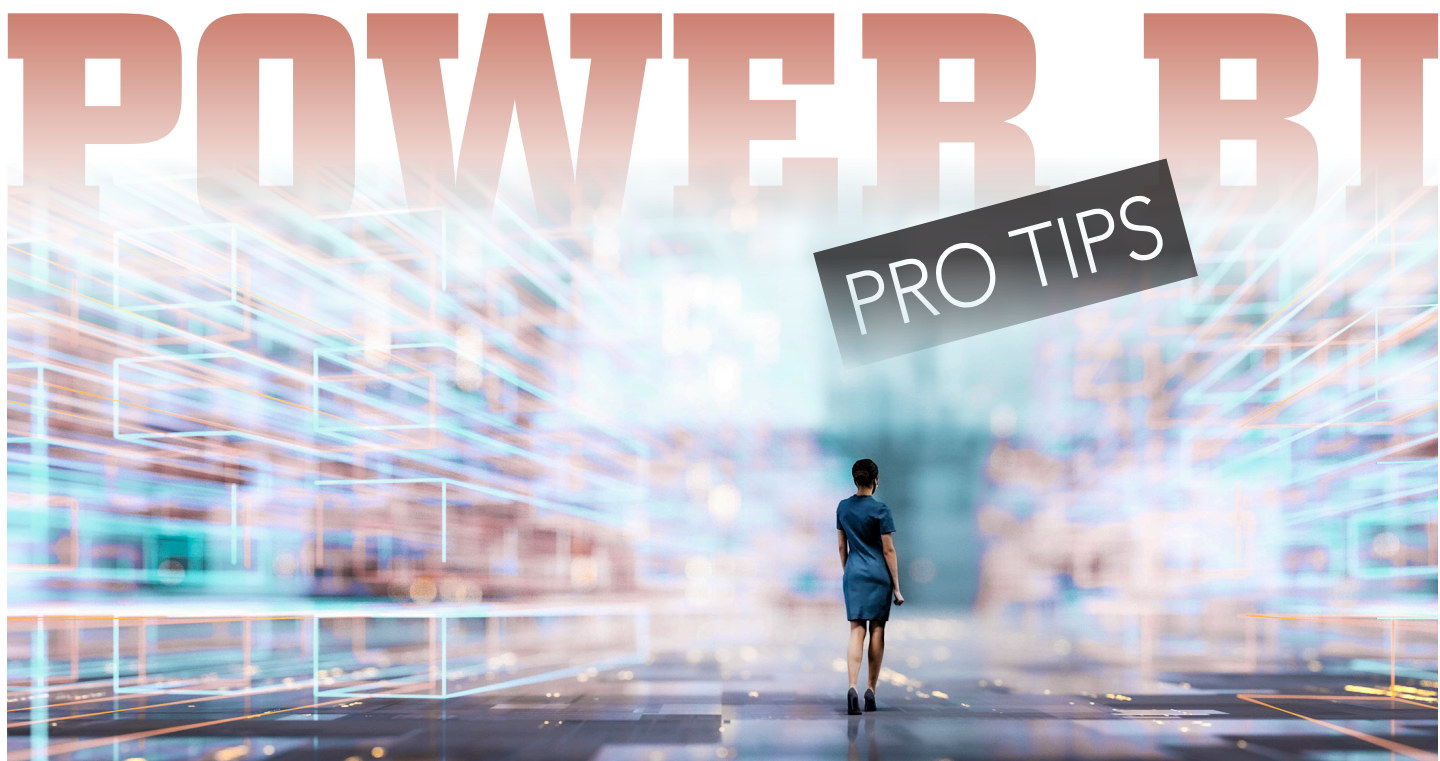


PHOTO: GREMLIN / ISTOCK

JAMISON WEST, strategic coach at ConnectStrat and former MSP, jokingly calls Microsoft Power BI “a gateway drug.” Why? “Give a little business intelligence to C-level executives, and they want more,” he explains.

It’s no joke, however, that channel pros who use Power BI, a front-end data visualization tool, as the foundation for an application development and consulting practice can enjoy great margins and repeat business.

Whether you consider Power BI a better way to create graphics than using Excel tools, or a top-line business analytics program, you are correct. This self-service business intelligence tool reads data from well over 100 programs, including all Microsoft sources on premises and in the cloud. And it’s relatively easy for people without in-depth skills.

“Fire it up, connect to a data source, and get powerful visuals and reports,” confirms Ross Ghiasi, an independent consultant in

the Dallas area who teaches Power BI to companies and schools. “Even managers can do it,” he quips. “Business intelligence sounds scary, but Power BI is popular because it simplifies the process.”

In addition, many customers already have Microsoft products “and want an all-in-one BI for a single source,” says Errin O’Connor, founder and chief architect at EPC Group in Houston, a 300-person IT consulting firm that includes an MSP practice. In addition, he believes COVID-19 increased the need for more business analytics, and Power BI benefitted.

Behind the Scenes

Channel pros who offer Power BI services fill a need for their clients, since “many applications don’t have great reports, or [have] ones that aren’t relevant to your needs,” says West.

Be aware that while coding in Power BI isn’t hard, there is a learning curve to im-

plementing it, however. For example, West pulled live data from ConnectWise for Power BI reports but found that “slowed the server to a crawl.” His solution? “We replicated the SQL data to another server.” That allowed him to pull data from the secondary server without impacting the production unit.

In addition, he warns, you “must be extremely savvy at the cloud data play,” and know where to access the data. He focused on Azure AD and ID management to access various cloud data sources’ security. His developers used the proper authentication to interrogate data files of different applications, often using tricks learned using other BI tools. “It was all cloud work.”

The real advantage of Power BI, says West, comes when you mix multiple data sources in reports. “We look at financial reports, and pull from all the Microsoft Dynamics programs, QuickBooks, sales, and ERP systems,” he says. When your team extracts

data from multiple back ends, or prepares raw data with a Power BI API script, you're moving into advanced business intelligence and providing value to customers that they can't easily get any other way.

Next-Level Power BI

O'Connor says momentum for Power BI keeps growing. "Customers and suppliers with Power BI push companies to get involved, too."

As a result, O'Connor's company interviews five to seven Power BI job candidates per day. He says the most important people to hire are the business analysts who translate tech speak into business speak and vice versa. Finding that person ignites a Power BI practice.

It's so important that O'Connor cross-trains business analysts to teach classes as Power BI architects. "They're not just trainer trainers, they're data architects." O'Connor's clients use their own data during their training classes, so it often takes some work to get those datasets cleaned up, he adds, but they consider that part of their training project. "We don't do the basic Power BI training."

O'Connor found training to be a surprisingly good Power BI business creation tool, moreover. "It seems counterintuitive, but those customers we trained are now on phases seven, eight, maybe nine," of expanding the amount of information available through BI. When properly trained, he says, clients spread the Power BI message across the company, and look for other ways to use the program to pull value from their data.

Ghiasi sees the same situation in companies he trains on Power BI. "Their vice presidents know their business, but they don't know how to visualize the data," he explains.

"They quickly see the value of providing information to the team, and Power BI uses auto-refresh to keep data up to date."

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

For EPC Group, continuing Power BI engagements have become the norm. "They call us after finished projects for new work because we know their data, along with their compliance and governance requirements," O'Connor notes.

Another jump in continuing engagements came after he dedicated three people to focus on user interface details for dashboards and reports. "We use the customer's colors and branding," he says, which has led to a big jump in client satisfaction and repeat business.

West has experienced that same stickiness. One of his Power BI clients regularly added service hours to keep a business analyst on-site creating new reports and working with company executives to convert those reports into business insights. "We charged an extra \$20k per month for a two-year agreement," he notes, adding that many of his Power BI clients opt for extra time to use his business analysts.

O'Connor has found Power BI engagements lucrative too. His largest Power BI project was for a "well-known shoe manufacturer" moving away from SAP to lower their costs. "We migrated 900 SAP reports to Power BI, saving millions and millions of dollars in development and maintenance costs." It was a multimillion-dollar project for EPC Group.



ERRIN
O'CONNOR

Getting Started

Ghiasi suggests that channel pros interested in Power BI help customers with a simple, easy project, like using the free desktop version to visualize and report on local Excel information. Excel is familiar, and Power BI is easier on large sheets than Excel's tools, he says.

O'Connor recommends putting together a proof of concept for clients, "including two or three reports and a dashboard." You must first learn the customer's data model, usually meaning the cloud, but can then give honest feedback on what they can and cannot do.

Another way to get started is to "help a client get better visuals out of an ERP with poor reporting," West says.

West believes the best route to success, however, is getting someone who understands the business part of BI to work with the client. If your company doesn't have a CTO or CIO, that may mean its owner. "Start getting familiar with Power BI, and clients will think it's magic."

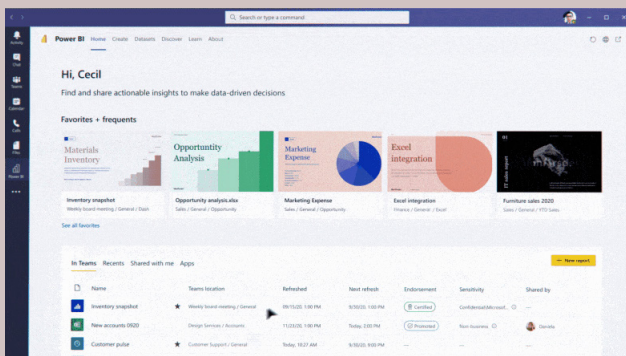
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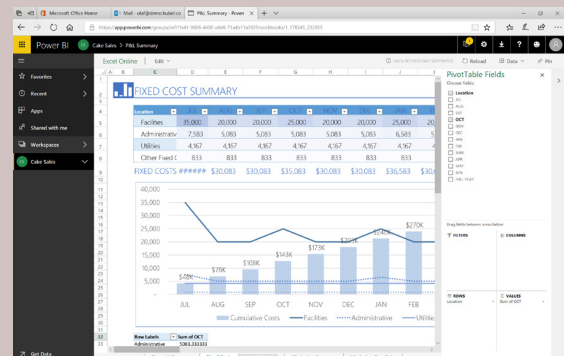
CHANNEL PROS who build a Power BI service offering can enjoy great margins and repeat business.

START WITH simple projects like creating BI reports from Excel and build proofs of concept to show clients.

GO TO MARKET by targeting business executives who can benefit from the power of data intelligence.



Enhanced Power BI



Excel in Power BI

Managed Print for the Hybrid Workforce

Industry research indicates work-related at-home printing is here to stay, and a cloud-first model is emerging to offer flexibility and address security issues. **By Geoffrey Oldmixon**

MAINTAIN your own printers, supply the ink, and charge SMBs by the page. That's one popular managed print services model, and it has worked for Winchester, Va.-based MSP Tech Team Solutions. But a new model is emerging to address the needs of a hybrid workforce.

"I had never really thought about the hybrid workplace [before COVID-19]," admits Tech Team owner Todd Drunagel. "We started managed print about five years ago, and it has all been at the workplace. We've put in a few printers for customers at home, but less than 10%."

But then a global pandemic happened, and 71% of workers conducted their jobs from home, according to an October 2020 Pew Research Center survey. "The first month, it was a noticeable drop-off," Drunagel says of his per-page print revenue.

Office-based printing was down, in fact, as much as 25%, according to Paul Birkett, acting global head of HP's Print Services & Solutions division. "We're starting to see a slow recovery in our [traditional office] volume now," he says, "but there's an element that won't come back at all."

Yet, people are in fact still printing pages. "While office printing declined dramatically, our sales of home printing and Instant Ink subscribers went crazy," Birkett reports. "We had just hit 5 million subscribers in January 2020. In October of 2021, we hit 10 million—100% growth."

Indeed, industry research indicates work-related at-home printing is here to stay.

"We asked people, 'Do you want to come back?'" explains Colin McMahon, associate director of Keypoint Intelligence, an industry analyst consultancy. "And the answer is, 'No,

"The focus can't be just on what it used to be. Print now needs to fit into two places."



COLIN McMAHON

Associate Director, Keypoint Intelligence

not really.' The majority of our respondents want hybrid."

While a hybrid workplace (a few days in the office and a few days at home) provides personal freedom, saves commute time, etc., it also poses print security risks. So, how do MSPs address those?

The answer: a unified, cloud-based subscription model. "A lot of the new solutions are cloud-first," McMahon says. "Even if you're using your home network, you'll have some encryption that will help secure your data."

That's exactly what HP's stepping up to deliver. Coming in the second half of 2022 is HP's [Managed Print Flex](#), a channel-friendly version of its recently launched Flexworker. At its core, Print Flex is a software and supplies subscription model that will be sold to the channel partner, who can then sell it onward. Licensing will be sold per device, at least to start.

"By default, it comes with HP Wolf Pro,"

an enterprise security service, Birkett explains. "We have a number of upgrades to design a policy that can feature 50 or even 300 controls, and the cloud platform will monitor policy enforcement."

When printing work-related documents at home, users will "connect through a secured, encrypted channel," Birkett explains. Beacon technology can actually require the user to be physically next to the print device to release the job, "so it doesn't accidentally print out and lay there."

But what about all those child homework assignments or holiday recipe printouts? Are those restricted at home?

"A user shouldn't have to figure out ways of making print work at home versus being in the office," Birkett says. "The beauty of this is that you don't need two different devices at home. You'll print over the Wi-Fi, unencrypted, for personal printing."

And maybe don't waste resources policing those extra personal pages? "We could configure the device to disallow personal printing," Birkett says, "but I've been advising businesses it's not worth it. Let people print a sensible amount of their own materials."

"We've got to change our thinking," Birkett adds. "Work-life is blending. If you take away that blending, you limit their work at home, too."

Keypoint Intelligence would concur. To more traditional managed print services providers, McMahon's advice would be: "The focus can't be just on what it used to be. Print now needs to fit into two places."

GEOFFREY OLDMIXON is a Massachusetts-based freelance writer and editor.

DISRUPTION-PROOFING YOUR BUSINESS

PointClick aims to build resilience for itself and its clients by staying ahead of technology trends and focusing on a value differential. **By Malik Khan**

P OINTCLICK TECHNOLOGIES follows a simple formula for building a resilient business that will continue to evolve and grow despite market disruption: We strive to stay two years ahead of technology trends to keep ourselves and our customers on the cutting edge. We couple that forward-thinking with a commitment to always putting the customer first by developing a deep understanding of their business so we can implement the technology that helps them achieve their goals.

As MSPs and CSPs, we can't continue doing business the way we've always done it. We must always be looking toward innovation.

My eureka moment came when I was working as a network admin for a national staffing company that decided to host its infrastructure with an ISP to prevent downtime and outages. It was brilliant, so I launched PointClick with a mission of removing the business risk of managing everything on premises. I signed up with an ISP, got my own rack and power, and started selling space. I bootstrapped the company by buying servers with my salary and then charging customers for the setup fee and three months of service up front.

From there, PointClick focused on developing the expertise to host high-end web applications. We partnered with digital marketing agencies and worked with a team in India to build an open source-based template that was more affordable than other hosts. We soon had NFL Enterprises and other big businesses as clients. Word spread and we grew.

As the market evolved to the cloud, we differentiated by offering managed cloud services, going deep into the code level with application monitoring products because nobody was doing that at the time. And to continue to stay relevant, we have been intentional about complementing what Microsoft offers and providing what the big cloud vendors can't—an intimate knowledge of our customers' businesses and deep, long-term relationships.

Today, about 90% of our cloud business is Azure based, but we never want to put all our eggs in one basket, so we also support AWS and are considering how to leverage Google Cloud Platform.

Other ways we are future proofing include adding IoT device management to our portfolio, building our own intellectual property with a platform that measures compliance risk at the user level, and opening an office in Gambia, West Africa, an emerging market and the country I emigrated from at 15.

Staying Ahead and Building Momentum

My advice for how to stay ahead of trends includes going to conferences, reading, attending webinars, and paying close attention to vendors' product roadmaps, particularly large players like Microsoft and Apple.

Finding good partners who share your vision is also critical. When PointClick was just five people, I came to Ingram Micro with a big opportunity. Instead of treating us like a small company, they provided the resources and backing that helped PointClick grow.

Be proactive about giving back and doing the little things too. For instance, when healthcare.gov, the website for the Affordable Care Act, experienced serious issues at rollout we created and distributed a free ebook explaining how to avoid six critical mistakes we identified. Microsoft saw it and invited us to present at their worldwide partner conference that year.

It's also important to create your own IP, whether that's developing your own toolset, a SaaS product, or something else to add value.

Continually look at ways to build your service catalog so you can evolve with the disruptions that inevitably come. For example, because we had positioned ourselves early on to move as much as possible to the cloud, our customers were already working remotely when COVID hit. In fact, they accelerated their cloud transition, resulting in \$1 million in Azure sales alone last year.

If you keep customers on the cutting edge, put their needs first, and provide stellar service, they will stay with you for the long term. Your business growth will naturally follow.



MALIK KHAN

FOUNDER AND CEO, POINTCLICK TECHNOLOGIES

FOUNDED 2007

LOCATION Raleigh, N.C.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES 60

WEBSITE pointclick.net

COMPANY FOCUS We help companies transform and transition to the cloud successfully.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS Ingram Micro Trust X Alliance

RECOMMENDED BOOK *No Excuses! The Power of Self-Discipline*, Brian Tracy (Hardcover, 2012)

FAVORITE PART OF MY JOB Solving problems

LEAST FAVORITE PART Solving problems

WHAT PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT ME
I'm not as serious as people think I am; at home I'm a big-time jokester with my kids!