Gaining Shelter From the Storm – A Technology Labour Model Tailor-Made to Manage Crises

This article addresses both the challenges CIOs and technology leaders experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and how companies and their technology functions responded to it. We learned that the organisations and their stakeholders most likely to shape their narratives in a positive direction were those who understood and leveraged the benefits of the new technology labour model that supports a managed services approach.

What happens to a technology organisation – specifically, the critical processes, activities, reporting and deadlines – when the IT team is suddenly unavailable, unable to work either in the office or remotely?

Such situations unfolded with blinding speed during the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, they could just as easily result from other unanticipated emergencies that prevent IT teams from managing vital and time-sensitive business-as-usual activities.

CIOs faced coronavirus-related crises that threatened the timely execution of these activities in highly unique ways. For example, organisations may have:

- Shifted business priorities and operations to respond to the needs of the communities and customers they serve, including assisting with supply chain logistics or manufacturing critical supplies – such shifts may have required workforce redeployments and revealed skill shortages in needed IT support.

- Addressed operational disruptions in international locations due to infrastructure challenges in applying a remote workforce model. These disruptions may have impacted customer service and caused delays of critical projects.

- Maintained critical IT infrastructure with limited staff available or responded with a rapid cloud deployment strategy to manage usage effectively and ensure high availability – this may have required companies to shift critical resources to ensure their technology environments were properly supported.

- Adapted and enabled new technologies quickly, yet in a secure and well-thought-out manner, in order for employees to operate effectively in the virtual world and continue business operations – this required companies to assess and manage new risks.

- Ensured that customer service and offshore operations were not disrupted.

- Deployed the necessary tools and technologies – for example, laptops, virtual private networks, cloud-based applications, collaboration tools – for staff to work remotely.

- Developed plans and methodologies to transition to a virtual workplace in an agile manner that allowed employees to perform their work and meet critical deadlines.

CIOs and technology leaders who were among the quickest to develop solutions to their distinctive challenges, both prior to and during the COVID-19 crisis, are alike in one crucial respect. They share an understanding of the speed, flexibility and value delivered when they have a blended team of full-time internal professionals working side-by-side with contractual staff and specialised consultants. This **managed services approach** is becoming paramount in today's dynamic business climate and proved even more valuable during unforeseen events like a global pandemic.

Prior to the COVID-19 global crisis, a growing number of CIOs and IT functions were turning to a managed services model to address key technology areas such as software development, data and analytics, service desk support, operational resilience, and security monitoring and response. A few examples:

- A large multinational company required a global solution to perform security advisory assessments on all of its recent international acquisitions, and then help create a one-, three- and five-year strategy for its global security footprint. Leveraging a managed technology solutions model, the company was able to organise a diverse 15-person team to perform PCI DSS advisory, penetration testing, CyberArk implementation, vulnerability management, SIEM engineering, endpoint deployment, and other ad hoc projects.

- A major chain of convenience markets needed to understand the technical security risk that existed across more than 100,000 locations. Specifically, the organisation wanted to identify critical risk vulnerabilities in order to prioritise remediation efforts properly. Lacking enough qualified and available internal resources, the organisation adopted a managed technology solution approach to run an outsourced vulnerability scanning programme.

- An organisation sought to improve its invoice and remittance process. Each month, the company received and processed approximately 4,000 supplier invoices, each with a unique format, design and data structure. Each invoice was reviewed, and the required accounts payable information was manually keyed into the procurement system. This process required considerable resources, which affected the company's ability to meet remittance and payment timelines. The organisation turned to a managed technology services team to design and deliver an automated invoice processing solution in the cloud, leveraging machine learning and intelligent process automation to find, read and export line items per vendor. In addition, an intelligent

process automation (IPA) bot incorporated structured data output to create procurement orders.

More organisations have turned successfully to a managed services model this year in response to pressing demands on the business and technology workforce and/or vendors that suddenly became unavailable.

The advantages and benefits are real. Faced with the challenge of team members unable to work onsite during the global pandemic and without the necessary technology tools and infrastructure to work remotely, a managed services solution enabled CIOs and their teams to keep technology activities moving forward, even as offices were locked down by government-mandated shelter-in-place/stay-at-home directives. By leveraging a managed services model, these CIOs and technology teams performed time-sensitive stabilisation and recovery needs and sustained ongoing transformation initiatives and projects while freeing up internal resources to focus on more direct efforts to support and manage the organisation's crisis response.

Many technology leaders remain unfamiliar with the managed services model and the benefits it delivers.

Planning for the Unplanned

CIOs and technology leaders often face challenges in trying to optimise staffing levels. Predictably, an IT team often proves to be too small when workloads peak (sparking a time-intensive scramble for resources) and too large when business slows. A steady stream of new challenges and opportunities – such as digital transformation; implementation of emerging technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, machine learning, deep learning); custom application development; workflow automation; cybersecurity programme and strategy development; and new governance, risk and compliance needs, among others – typically create sudden demands for new and often specialised technology skills. Factor in greater worker mobility, the emergence of the on-demand economy and unplanned events, and building a highly skilled and experienced, yet also flexible, technology function becomes even more of a challenge.

Technology leaders now have an opportunity to build a more flexible department that will enable them to plan for the unplanned. Through this approach, they can change the size and skill mix of their teams to respond in an agile manner to shifting business conditions – including the option to engage a virtual workforce, a need that has become critical in 2020. At the same time, there are new opportunities to bring in adaptable, entrepreneurial people to participate as members of a company's collaborative professional core, or to operate as part of a contingent labour force or as long-term contractors, applying their specialised skills to tasks and projects as needed.

To build this new managed services model most effectively, many CIOs have cultivated relationships with external partners, developing a source of talent and expertise with deep and nuanced knowledge of their organisation's people, processes, technology and culture. That familiarity provides technology and security functions with on-demand access to experts and resources who can address particular short-term needs or tackle complex, unique and one-off situations. In addition, these individuals, provided through external partners, typically are capable of working remotely, and thus can provide support at any time and from any location.

Partner firms that deploy a managed services model provide organisations with 1) the operational expertise needed to enhance an organisation's professional core; and 2) subject-matter expertise and consulting services that apply a combination of specialised skills and earned organisational knowledge. These firms typically have a more efficient and better-informed onboarding process along with the ability to launch or move into projects quickly. This model helps technology leaders avoid over-hiring or unduly burdening employees.

Three Scenarios Requiring Effective Solutions During a Crisis

The swiftness and scale of the COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in a critical mass of complex, unique and one-off situations. The crisis created daunting tests to organisational resiliency, as well as opportunities to embrace dramatically new approaches to IT staffing models, remote workforce capabilities, business continuity and more.

While most, if not all, of these challenges are well-suited to the strengths of the managed services model (speed, agility, flexibility, virtualisation), as noted earlier, many technology functions were leveraging this new labour model well before the pandemic materialised. They deployed the model to quickly ramp up new capabilities, operate in a leaner fashion, scale up and down more cost-effectively, and enhance resilience, all to help improve performance and grow the business.

Crises have a way of accelerating changes looming on the horizon, and the pandemic certainly had this effect on technology departments as CIOs sought ways to swiftly address a steady procession of complex and unique challenges. Following are situations CIOs and technology departments faced as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic:

- **Government-mandated lockdowns that close offices:** Throughout a large part of the world, government-mandated lockdowns halted mission-critical technology projects and operations within many companies. There were numerous instances in which employees could not work in their offices and did not have access to the connectivity, hardware and infrastructure required to work remotely. These office closures, combined with an inability to stand up virtual teams, could have prevented technology/IT functions from providing critical needs such as service desk support and security monitoring. That made it necessary for a managed services solution that can bring teams of 20, 50 or more specialists online as quickly as possible to sustain and adjust (up or down) those operations for an unknown duration.

  Sustaining major projects and initiatives in crisis mode: A large number of technology teams had major implementations and other large-scale initiatives underway, or about to commence, prior to the pandemic. As these functions switched into crisis-containment and continuity management mode, technology leaders may have needed to pull staff from those initiatives, which undoubtedly stalled them, despite their long-term importance. By quickly handing off those projects to trusted partners with existing knowledge of the business and its culture, CIOs and technology leaders were able to allocate more resources to pressing stabilisation and recovery needs.

- **The sweeping transition to a remote working model:** Among many other milestones, 2020 has featured what likely ranks as the quickest and most sweeping shift to a remote labour model in the history of business. While it remains uncertain how long this shift will last, it's clear that at least some organisations and their technology groups were better equipped to stand up and manage virtual teams than others due to a range of industry and structural factors. We saw technology leaders consider a managed services model as a way to speed and improve the effectiveness of the move to a virtual workplace (e.g., via implementations of cloud-based workflow tools).

These and other examples of COVID-19-driven crises required CIOs and their partners to develop tailored and nuanced solutions in an expedited manner.

Custom approaches to any challenge, let alone crisis-driven issues, traditionally require significant time to design – and as we all know, time is in short supply during a crisis. Technology leaders cannot invest days or weeks sifting through resumes, scrutinising new vendors or evaluating lengthy proposals to solve time-critical problems. They need solutions that reflect and leverage knowledge of their technology function's unique structures, talent and culture, and that can meet critical project and implementation deadlines. CIOs and technology leaders also need to trust their solution provider to marshal all of the resourcing associated with implementing the solution.

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