



Systems Management

Managed verses Monitored

A 'Power to Manage' guide from AKCSL

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Introduction

There are many companies offering Remote Management or Remote Monitoring services to companies for their IT infrastructure. Are they all the same and if not what is the difference between a Managed Solution and a Monitored Solution?

This document will look at the difference between Monitoring and Managing an IT infrastructure and also look at Service Level Agreements (SLA's).

In the case of both Remote Monitored and Remote Managed solutions you agree to pay a monthly, subscription, fee to the service provider for the provision of a service. Just like your Internet access bill this is payable monthly in advance, although some service providers may invoice quarterly in advance.

Monitored Systems

Typically a monitored system is one where you are notified when specific problems occur. For example a hard disk is full, or a key Service has stopped. The notification can either be direct from some software which has been installed on your Systems or by email or a phone call from your service provider.

Monitoring Software

If you have installed a monitoring product yourself, something like Microsoft System Center Essentials, then it is now up to you to interpret the information in the alert message and work out what to do next. i.e.

'Is this something that I should be concerned about, and if so how do I resolve this problem?'

The better monitoring products have inbuilt Knowledge, which should point you in the direction of what to do next. However if you are not an expert in the product which has the problem, for example Exchange or SQL Server, even Knowledge base information may require additional interpretation for you to be able to resolve the problem.

Monitoring Service

Where you have contracted with a Service Provider to monitor your systems they will have discharged their responsibility, for monitoring, once they have informed you of the problem. Most of the monitoring providers will offer to resolve the problem for you at an additional charge; generally this is on a 'time and materials' basis.

Monitored Systems, by their nature, only provide after the fact reporting. They will not include problem resolution or pro-active work for problem mitigation. i.e. A monitoring solution will not deal with software items like:-

- Application Patches
- Software Deployment

- Antivirus update management
- Inventory and Asset management

All of the above items, as part of a managed service, can help to ensure that your systems are working correctly and provide a robust, reliable and cost efficient infrastructure.

Managed Systems

Where systems are managed, either by a Remote Service Provider or an in-house IT person, they are responsible for receiving the notification, interpreting the information and then resolving the problem. Depending on the severity of the problem the issue could be resolved and the end users may not even be aware that a problem existed.

If a severe problem occurs on a managed system, for example you are unable to send or receive email. Then the team responsible for managing your infrastructure will alert the primary contact and explain the situation to them and, where possible, provide an estimate for a resolution time. This notification and escalation process will have strict time limits as to when the next steps take place and how the problem should be escalated. This process is true for both an in house IT supplier and an external managed service

Note: in the case above the customer is being contacted to notify them of a critical issue and to give the customer status information. They are not being asked:

'This is the problem....., what do you want us to do?'

Vendor Management

The best Managed Services are fully managed 24x7 and include vendor management. Vendor management is the part of the service which means that we liaise with your hardware vendors, on your behalf, to report hardware issues which need resolving. This will also include scheduling the resource and ensuring that the work is completed satisfactorily.

If the problem was a hardware problem: e.g. A hard disk has failed. Then the service provider will notify your Hardware Maintenance provider so that a replacement disk could be available to be installed Monday morning, assuming that you have a 24x7 hardware contract.

Software Management

Managed solutions will include:-

- Application Patches
- Software Deployment
- Antivirus update management
- Inventory and Asset management

Application Patches

Keeping all systems at the latest Operating System Patches improves the resilience and reliability of the systems. Also ensuring that all systems have a consistent and appropriate set of patches reduces the chances of any inter-operability issues.

Software Deployment

Making sure that applications are installed on all of the relevant desktop computers can take up a lot of time. Most Managed Solutions will include a software deployment capability so that you can target specific groups of computers for new applications. In most cases this will be carried out by your service provider on request. i.e. *'I need to get the latest version of Office deployed to the accounts department.'*

Software and patch management can be one of the most time consuming activities for the Medium sized business and is often neglected.

Antivirus Update Management

It is essential that Antivirus software is updated on a regular basis for it to be effective. Keeping antivirus software up to date dramatically reduces the chances that your systems will be infected by a virus. There is nothing worse for your business than for you to send infected emails to your clients.

Inventory & Asset Management

This is primarily a reporting function but is useful for several things:-

1. Working out which system may need upgrading
2. Ensuring you remain compliant on software license agreements
3. If you have an Asset report it is useful for insurance purposes, to prove what was owned, should you ever lose equipment

One of the other uses of reporting is to keep track of how quickly disks are filling up on different systems and then balance storage requirements across different computers. Knowing where you have spare capacity could mean that you would not have to upgrade systems or buy a replacement computer and hence save yourself money.

24x7 vs. 09:00 to 17:30

The argument here is always 'Do I really need 24x7 cover, 365 days of the year, when we work 09:00am to 5:30pm Monday to Friday?'

If a problem occurs at 7pm on a Friday with a backup failing, do you want to be told on Monday morning that the backup failed, or would you rather than your service provider resolved the problem and started a new backup for you?

Whilst most companies have people in the office from 09:00am to 5:30pm your computer systems, website, business applications, backups etc are busy outside of these hours. Problems can occur outside of business hours which could mean that you are not in a position to carry out normal business first thing in the morning. By monitoring and managing your systems 24x7 problems which occur overnight can be resolved by the start of the business day.

Similarly software patches and updates can be distributed and implemented outside of business hours, so that they do not impinge on the working day. Software updates which require a re-boot of the server can be managed in the same manner so that the update is

carried out outside of your business hours. The server can then be remotely re-booted at a convenient time so that backups and maintenance tasks are not affected.

Service Level Agreement

A Service Level Agreement (SLA) provides a guaranteed availability, or level of service, for your systems. This is a two way agreement between you, the customer, and your service provider. It will specify:-

- What systems are covered
- What is excluded
- The depth of management
- Level of Service
- Escalation procedure – should a problem occur, who is notified, how often they are updated
- Financial penalties should the service provider fall outside the agreed SLA

Where you have a fixed price, monthly subscription, contract with a service provider with a defined SLA and financial penalties it is in the interest of all parties to provide a robust and resilient solution. i.e. Both parties to the agreement want the same outcome, a resilient fault free infrastructure.

If you are paying a fixed fee for monitoring and then paying a separate fee for problem resolution the interests of the two parties to the contract diverge. Where the incentives to the parties to the contract differ you are bound to have conflict and neither party will be happy with the outcome.

Summary

You can see that there is a huge difference between a Monitoring Service and a Managed Service. From Service Provider to Service Provider there can even be a difference as to what is included in a Managed Service; however whatever is included or excluded it is essential that you have a clear SLA with defined financial penalties. If you don't have a fixed price service with financial recourse should the vendor fail to deliver then you cannot be getting value for money.

It should be in the interest of both parties to the SLA and contract to want the same outcome. The more robust the computer systems are on a day to day basis the happier both the customer and the Service Provider are.

About AK Computer Services

AKCSL are a specialist Systems Management consultancy based in the south of England. We are a Microsoft Gold Partner and NetIQ Premier Partner. We have been focused on systems management solutions since our inception in 2002. Contact information:-

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