

In it for the long haul

Systems integrators aren't just product experts, they're long-term business partners

BY LEISCHEN STELTER

While technology expertise is highly valued and necessary in today's market, savvy end users are requiring that system integrators understand not only the organization's current business and security needs, but also anticipate the organization's future needs.

"We see the value of the system integrator as being a full fledged business partner," said Kevin Engelhardt, vice president and general manager, Diebold. "Integrators need to be able to consult a project all the way out, that's where the level of value is to the customer. You have to look two or three years out. Integrators have to say: 'Let's roadmap legacy products into the future plan. How can we leverage what we're currently invested and determine what we need to replace and how?'" said Engelhardt.

BALANCING THE BUDGET

Particularly during this time of economic uncertainty, it is important for integrators to understand both the business and security challenges end users face, as well as their financial and budgetary strategy.

"The question now is: How do you use the current system without the 'rip and replace' method?" said Engelhardt. "In this economy, businesses have to capitalize on their investment and utilize technology that brings scalability. The cost of capital layout is significant and you need to make sure projects work within a budget and what you're putting together is obtainable, but also from a technology point of view, a solution that is forward thinking enough."

And while the economy is certainly on everyone's mind and organizations are doing everything possible to save money, utilizing the expertise and experience of an integrator can arguably save an end user money in the end.

Frank Brewer, group vice president of ADT, advanced integration division, said that while it may initially seem less expensive for end users to purchase products independently,

it often ends up costing more in the long run. For example, he cited a utility company that chose to make a large wholesale purchase of video equipment based primarily on price. After purchasing the cameras the company then hired ADT to install and configure the system.

"There was a quandary of issues because it wasn't engineered properly and the pieces didn't fit together. That's where it ends up costing more in the end, especially if you add in the aggravation factor," he said. "This is not a commodity type of business and unless you're a specialized group [with certain skills], it's hard to do it that way and that's the value integrators can bring."

FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS, NOT JUST PRODUCTS

And while individual products are an integral part of systems, integrators know that technology changes so quickly that it's not products that make a system, it's the capabilities and scalabilities of the system as a whole. "A true integrator is a solutions provider," said Tony DeStefano, director of integrated security systems with TAC. "They won't say 'You must have this product' and throw a product at a problem because, down the line, it's not going to work and not going to solve the problem. That's the value we bring to the table is the ability to look at what application will

work best for the customer."

Perhaps integrators' shift away from being product centric is a result of end users being more educated about products and therefore more interested in what a product can contribute to a project rather than focused on the company that manufactures it. "We see end users getting away from being manufacturer specific, especially with video, it's more about feature and functionality and being solutions based rather than name based," said Engelhardt.

In the case of high-end projects where video analytics are used, for example, and integrator must employ highly specialized personnel to meet customer demands. "Depending on a customer's needs for a certain level of analytics, they will need professional services to tune those services, and that requires highly skilled people," said Stephen Russo, director, security and privacy technology, IBM Corp.

WORKING TOGETHER

While most integrators prefer to work directly with end users to develop and design a project, some customers, often government and municipalities who may be unfamiliar with security measures or other companies working on large or complex projects, will utilize the services of a consultant. However, balancing the needs and wants of the consultant and the end user with what is possible is often challenging for an integrator.

For example, when TAC was working with Logan International Airport, it experienced conflicting wants and needs between a consultant and an end user. "The consultant wanted the ability to deliver video to a PDA and in the event an alarm breach occurred, the command center would dispatch state trooper and the intent was to have video right in the hands of the police," said DeStefano. "The technology was there to do it, but the security director didn't want video going over wireless because he was afraid it could be comprised, which is ... hard to do, but technically yes, the system could be defeated. He didn't want to take any risk, so we didn't deploy the technology."

Often consultants will recommend products that aren't necessarily the best solution for the project. "What the consultant recommends is not necessarily practical," said DeStefano. "There are so many products out there that consultants often essentially understand the features and functions, but not the actual operation of a product."

However, working together with consultants and end users to find the best solution is another important skill for an integrator. "Often we form a team between the end user, consultant and ourselves," he said. "We've had to find the middle ground between the end user and consultant to find what works."

VOICE YOUR NEEDS

Communication between all involved parties is also important. "End users need to make sure the integrator completely understands the end result," said Engelhardt. "Specification is a guideline on what is to be built, but the end user has features, functionality and other requirements that may not be clear on the floor plan. Customers need to make sure you're fully getting what you want out of it."

Although system integrators are often experts in products and overall solutions and should be knowledgeable about a customer's organization, the end user will always know more about the organization and its needs.

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Frank Brewer

Due diligence

What security practitioners need to consider before hiring a systems integrator

BY RHIANNA DANIELS

So, you've got to hire a systems integrator. If you do not have an existing relationship with an integration firm, wading through the competitive waters can be daunting. But according to industry experts, there are important things to evaluate before making a final selection.

Robert Hile, vice president of business development for Adesta, said end users need to choose an integrator that understands their specific business, who its customers are and what the underlying business objectives are.

"For our end users, and what is critically important for all customers, is that they really need to find a partner that will design, specify, install and maintain the proper mix of security technologies without interrupting the business model," Hile said. "It is key to layer these technologies in a way that does not interrupt the flow of business."

It's not just about installing technology anymore — end users are having to justify their purchases more than ever and an integrator's ability to look inside the business needs, and deliver additional capabilities and solutions to address those needs is becoming more and more critical.

"Integration for the sake of integration rarely sells," said John Gnadinger, director of engineering for Johnson Controls. "If it doesn't solve a business need you are not going to be able to pay for it."

MARKET EXPERTISE

Finding a systems integrator with vertical market expertise is critical, most experts say, as they are more apt to be well versed in the risks and challenges a specific sector faces. For example, Adesta works with many ports and because of this is versed in the risks and regulations these facilities face.

Kevin Williams, Protection One's director of national accounts, agreed. Specifically in the restaurant industry, being able to understand the challenges and small margins these businesses face helps a provider recommend solutions, not just products. Restaurants are leveraging video systems for training and traffic flow. Because of these emerging uses for traditional security technology, customers are now looking for information from providers detailing how they can provide a better solution to a specific vertical as well as a full line of services specialized to their business, he said.

"It is evolving into a business solution platform, not just a video system or an access system," he said. "A provider has to have a good handle that technology is going to address not just security needs, but business needs."

WHERE TO START?

Initially, the scope of a project determines what an end user will need from an integrator.

"The buy need of the customer is going to vary widely," Williams said. "In other words if I am a single location business I have a different buy need as compared to a customer that has 56 locations that requires service across the board and across the country."

Williams said that is only the first step. Next, security practitioners need to look for "quality and reputation of the provider from a financial standpoint. Are they going to be there for the long haul? Do they have clients they can reference and show completed projects that are similar to what you are looking to embark on?"

MONEY TALKS

Taking into account the state of today's economy, taking a hard look at

an integrator's financial stability is critical during the due diligence process. "This is maybe one of the most important one in today's economy," said David Duda, a consultant with Newcomb & Boyd Consulting, "making sure the integrator or security contractor has the bonding capability and the financial strength to perform the task necessary to complete the project you have in mind."

Duda evaluates integrator's financial capability through company documents, financial ratings from Dun & Bradstreet, for example, and audited financial statements as the first step in its evaluation process.

Hile said financially stable integration firms are more apt to be able to access the technology vendors that they need. "Vendors are becoming more strict on payables and collections," he said. "If an integrator is not financially sound, they might be apt to work with a smaller vendor who will give them credit and that can pigeonhole the end user with a product line that does not necessarily meet their needs."

Duda said one of the other things he thinks it is also important for end users to understand is that "integrators quite often come with product affiliations that are not necessarily objective. What they do not want to happen is the integrator to be proposing criteria based on what they have in their warehouse and what they can make the most profit on."

Gnadinger said that the integrator can add value because of its knowledge in many product lines. Even so, he encourages customers to be well versed in the products that are going to be used in their organization to be able to fully leverage the capabilities of the solution.

TALKING THE TALK

The convergence of physical security and IT has made it imperative that integrators are able to present its specifications to an end user's IT department because "you have to assume that IT is going to be involved in security. They don't typically write the specifications or write the money but they can stop the process dead cold if they are not involved in the transaction," Williams said.

He also said IT has been through previous product migrations to the network, and sometimes those processes were not properly vetted. An integrator's ability to address the IT department's concerns can potentially help move a networked project forward. "If you are not properly prepared to answer these questions, you are at a disadvantage," Williams said.

EXPERIENCE

Duda said the breadth of experience of an integrator's project management team also plays a role in the evaluation process. "It is key that employees running the project have the experience and training ... with references in conjunction with this experience," he said.

Support structure is another consideration, Duda said. "You want someone that will be around after the systems are put in to provide maintenance and respond to repair calls. We evaluate the training they have, their response times and of course, how close they are to a project."

At the end of the day, it is important for an end user to choose an integrator that will not only complete a current project but also can adapt to changing risks and technology challenges.

"The key to being a successful integrator is to continue to evolve as the market changes as the market changes," Williams said. "If not, you are going to be left behind."