

THE AUTOMATION IMPERATIVE



**Using a best practice approach to efficiently deliver scalable,
competitive, and profitable managed services**

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The future of Managed Services has never been brighter. One study by consulting firm MarketsandMarkets expects the MSP market to jump from \$14.75 billion in 2013 to \$265.05 billion in 2018.¹ The flipside of this good news story is that dramatic growth predictions like this have attracted a lot of attention.

Traditional, pure play MSPs now find themselves rubbing shoulders with a new breed of MSP. VoIP, print management, audio visual, copier providers and many others have converged on the managed services sector as a way to diversify their revenue and add new value to established customers. These are bigger, well-resourced competitors; and all are hungrily eying the attractive margins that have propelled managed services into the limelight.

More competitors bring two inevitabilities to the managed services market: greater commoditization of services and price wars. To compete, traditional MSPs must deliver their managed services with razor sharp efficiency. They have to push technician utilization rates to the maximum.

Despite this imperative, few MSP are able to achieve the competitive productivity levels required using traditional tools that are based on a non-scalable, non-repeatable, and non-best practice managed services delivery model. What is required is a new approach to an established success strategy: automation.

The importance of automating routine IT tasks to achieve superior efficiencies is not a new story. What's new, and urgently needed by the industry, is greater insight to what tasks should be automated and how to ensure all services are delivered to a consistent "best in industry" standard using repeatable, scalable processes.

Achieving greater levels of efficiency, productivity, and profitability through a dramatically different approach to automation is the focus of this white paper.

READ THIS WHITE PAPER TO LEARN:

- Why traditional approaches to automation could be considered "old school" and ineffective
- The critical importance of creating your own 'secret sauce' for delivering services – based on best practices and what works for your business
- How new approaches to automation can double or triple the number of customers managed with the same headcount
- Key requirements for next-generation automation solutions for delivering maximum value



¹ CRN, August 15, 2013, <http://www.crn.com/news/managed-services/240160016/analyst-firm-predicts-huge-managed-services-growth-but-msps-urge-caution.htm>

EFFICIENCY AND PROFITABILITY ENABLER

A key goal of MSPs is to reduce costs. A proven way to achieve this is to automate as many IT services and repetitive tasks as possible – and increase the number of devices managed per technician. Simply put, a technician that does not use some type of automation tool to deliver IT services generally relies on manual tasks.

Add an advanced Remote Monitoring and Management (RMM) automation tool – like N-able's N-central® – and the same technician can manage up to 250 to 500 devices – or more depending on their skill level. As a result, MSPs enjoy fewer site visits to resolve problems, the quality of services to end users is improved, technician's utilization rates increase, and the cost of service delivery is lowered. These could be considered some of the positive side effects for using an automation tool.

Automation enables many MSPs to produce the same or better results with fewer people on staff.

As impressive as these benefits are, they won't enable you to achieve the kind of breakthrough value and efficiency that is required in a highly competitive managed services market. You'll need to automate more IT tasks with a solution that enables your technicians to manage in excess of 500 devices each – and deliver services with new levels of competitive efficiency while remaining profitable.

Cohn Consulting Corporation, an MSP serving SMBs across the US quickly came to this realization. As their business grew, they honed in on automating their IT services to simplify their business while better meeting clients' needs more cost effectively. For Cohn, automation was the key to producing the same or better results with fewer people on staff – and they did not need a technician working after-hours to perform routine procedures.

Cohn Consulting is one of many managed service firms that have used automation to streamline their operation and scale their practice without adding manpower. Others, like Belgium based Accel Computer Service have used automation to “change how they do business.”

Accel now automates everything from the onboarding of new customers, new users, and devices, ticket creation, software removal, third party patching, and the implementation of back up and endpoint services. Accel is also leveraging the efficiency enabling power of automation to open the door to new markets and even bigger thinking. In addition to SMBs, Accel is now providing profitable managed services to larger companies.

The question is not whether to automate, but rather, what should be automated?

AUTOMATING THE RIGHT PROCESSES: THE MISSING LINK

A successful automation solution starts with best practices, policies, and processes – these are what you must automate to achieve new breakthroughs in productivity and achieve optimal efficiency.

Most MSPs will agree that proven best practices and repeatable processes form the ‘secret sauce’ for running a profitable MSP business. These could be based equally on their business experience or recognized best-in-industry practices. Regardless of what they are based on, these processes enable any MSP to deliver reliable, scalable IT services to the same standards and to all customers every day of the week. Automating the right processes is the key to improved efficiency and profitability.

Alarmingly, and in the vast majority of cases, these same MSP's admit their critical IP knowledge related to IT service delivery ‘walks out the door’ at the end of every day. This is why documented best practices and automated processes go together like hand-and-glove. They are the critical foundation and often the missing link in a quest to achieve breakthrough improvements in efficiency, productivity, and profitability. Best practices for all IT tasks create the road-map for what to automate.

The real question is; how easy is it for an MSP to actually automate key IT tasks and achieve breakthroughs in efficiency? In many cases, the answer is: not very easy at all.

THE PROBLEM WITH AUTOMATION APPROACHES

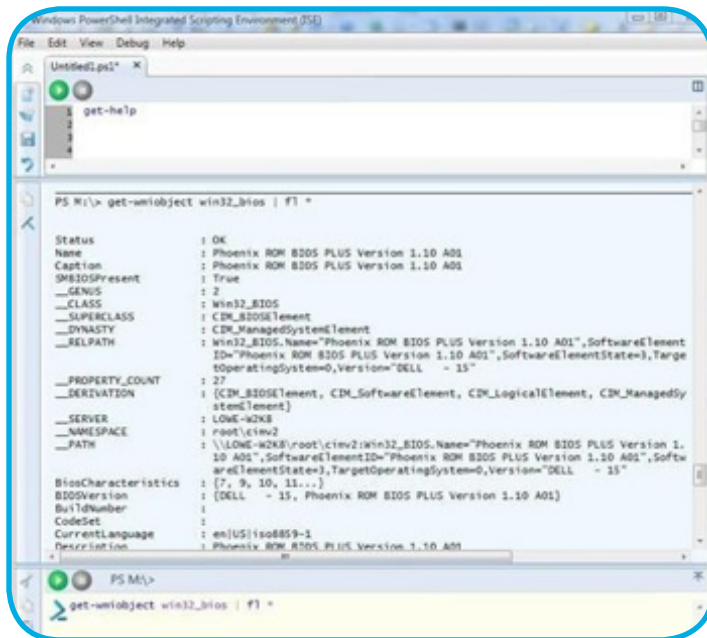
Unfortunately, many RMM tools rely on scripting knowledge to automate many IT tasks. Scripting is a hassle. Key challenges include:

- The need to develop and test
- On-going maintenance
- Reliance on the knowledge of key individuals

Ironically these challenges lead to issues that undermine the very efficiencies enabled by automating a task in the first place. Here's why.

Development and testing

Developing and testing scripts is a complex undertaking – one that involves programming expertise that can be expensive, if not challenging to bring in-house for smaller MSPs. Also, many scripts end up being very customer or site specific – and can't be easily adapted or applied to multiple customers. As such, many scripting investments do not result in scalable assets that can be easily reused to meet other customers' IT needs and achieve the important efficiencies needed when delivering managed services, especially in highly competitive environments.



Complex scripts like this require specialized technical knowledge and are often written by individuals who do not document their processes. When these senior resources leave, MSPs are vulnerable to service delivery

interruptions to end customers and must scramble to find a replacement.

Costly maintenance

Trying to fix, change or update scripts to stay relevant and current with new releases is time consuming and labor intensive. The on-going investment to maintain scripts often outweighs the benefit that will be realized in terms of incremental reductions in manual labor through a script that automates an IT task.

Knowledge of key individuals

Many MSPs struggle with the fact that critical automation and process knowledge is centralized in the heads of one or two technicians. Few processes get documented; and they are often shared 'as needed' to accomplish a specific task. As a result, many MSPs place their business at risk by relying on the knowledge of one or two individuals and undocumented processes. When a key individual leaves, remaining resources try to pick up the slack. However, in the short term, service delivery efficiency, consistency, and quality can all be compromised while the MSP scrambles to find a replacement or retrain existing staff.

NEXT GENERATION AUTOMATION – A ONE-TWO COMBINATION

To achieve new breakthroughs in efficiency and drive consistent, repeatable and scalable IT services, MSPs need a dramatically new approach that integrates two critical elements: (1) a comprehensive library of ready to use IT best practices with the ability to (2) quickly automate these or any other IT process without any need for scripting knowledge – using an automation engine with simple “drag and drop” functionality.

In short, what is required is the ability to automate your own ‘secret sauce’ while removing your dependence on complicating scripting knowledge.

Technician's Runbook: best practices are your best friend

You need to be one hundred percent confident that your technicians are doing things in a consistent, scalable, and repeatable fashion with no margin for error. To accomplish this, you need fingertip access

to best practices and standard operating procedures that will guide your technicians and IT service delivery. N-able calls this a Runbook: a compilation of best technical practices drawn from successful, profitable IT businesses around the globe.

A Runbook eliminates your dependence on ‘tribal knowledge’ and the worrisome vulnerability this creates. It equips you with a play-by-play recipe for achieving standardized, scalable IT processes based on recognized best practices – or what works best for your specific managed services business.

A new 'Automation Engine'

A Technician Runbook gives you a great a foundation to start with – ready to use best industry practices for a scalable, repeatable, best practice MSP service model. However, by itself, a Runbook is a source of enabling potential for your managed services business. It has the potential to free-up your technicians from the drudgery of scripting while automating tasks and processes using the very best industry practices.

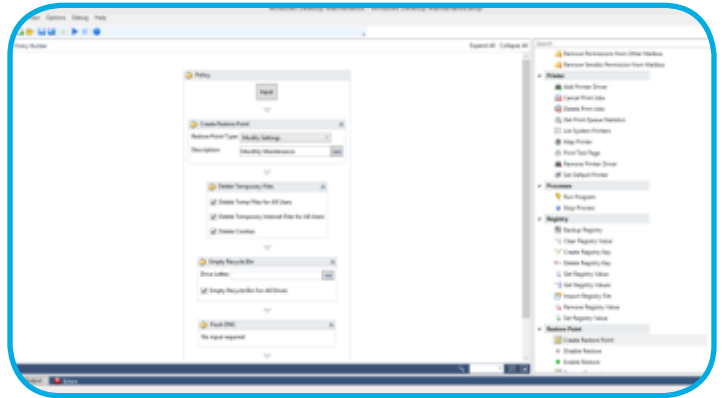
To transform this potential into an operational reality, the Runbook needs to be coupled with an automation engine that can pull pre-scripted objects from an automation library or quickly modify a default policy or to create your own policy to automate a process, all with point-and-click ease.

Automation Object Library

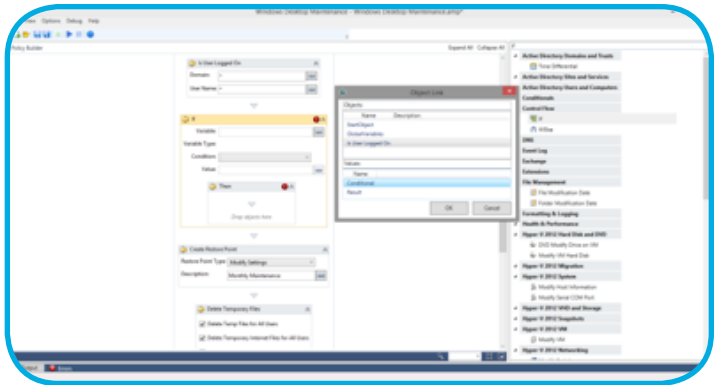
An Automation Object Library is a critical feature of an automation engine for your managed services business. An Object Library centralizes hundreds of pre-defined, pre-tested, and re-usable automation objects for key IT tasks or processes. Each object is based on proven best practices as documented in the MSP Technician's Runbook – or your own policies based on how you deliver managed services.

To meet the myriad of challenges your face today, an Automation Object Library must be comprehensive and provide objects that span all facets of your business and IT service delivery.

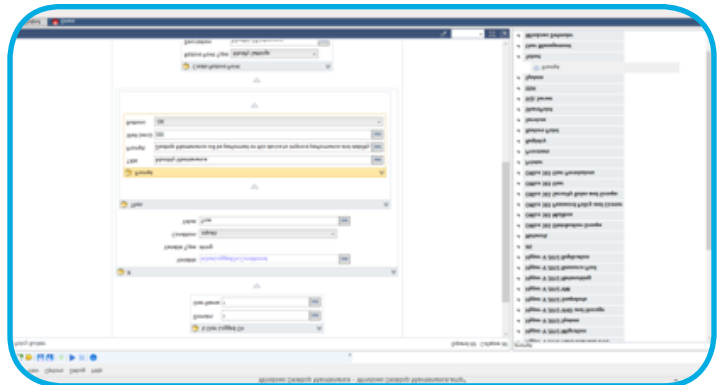
The ability to easily modify or create a new automation policy to better suit your customer needs is a critical requirement



Shown here is a default Windows Desktop Maintenance automation policy used to maintain the performance and stability of a Windows Desktop.



Here the MSP has chosen to enhance the default policy to display a message to the logged-on user that Desktop Maintenance is being performed.



Following this simple change, a new message informing them that monthly desktop maintenance will be performed is automatically displayed to any logged-on user. Using a GUI driven Automation Engine, it takes less than a minute to make this change and requires no scripting knowledge.

Here's a partial list of the object categories required to drive an efficient, scalable IT business:

- Policy Management
- Systems Management
- Local Account Management
- Network Management
- File and Folder Management
- Registry Management
- Event Log Management
- Performance and Health Management
- DNS Management
- Hardware Management
- Exchange Server Management
- Active Directory

IN SUMMARY

As competition for managed services continues to increase, traditional MSPs must find ways to deliver services with greater efficiency. Automating routine IT tasks to reduce the need for manual intervention by technicians is a good start and recognized standard practice.

To realize maximum benefit and efficiency enablement, automation must be coupled to best practices – those recognized by the industry or based on processes that work for your managed services business.

Above all, you need the flexibility to quickly modify or create your own automated processes that support your unique approach to managed services. Consistency, scalability, repeatability and ease-of-use are key requirements of a successful automation solution.

An automation solution that combines a best practice Runbook – powered by a new object rich automation engine – will enable you to realize breakthrough benefits that include:

- Free-up technicians to pursue higher value work
- Eliminate the need to write expensive and quickly outdated in-house scripts to automate routine tasks and processes
- Effortlessly automate tasks and processes related to configuration management, change manage-

ment, and incident management – and other tasks that technicians normally do

- Ensure all IT services are delivered to a common standard using scalable, repeatable processes
- Achieve new levels of efficiency, productivity, and profitability

The beauty of this approach to automation is that it can be used by less senior technicians to complete a wide range of routine tasks. In some cases, you may be able to exceed current service level agreements with fewer technicians.

The N-able Advantage

N-able Technologies by SolarWinds, is driving industry innovation with **Automation Manager**, a next-generation automation solution that combines powerful Technician Runbook with Automation Manager, a powerful, state-of-the-art drag-and-drop UI automation engine. Automation Manager comes as a standard feature with N-central, a #1 rated Remote Monitoring and Management (RMM) Automation platform.

MSP Technician Runbook – best practices at your fingertips now

The N-able Runbook is offered at no cost to N-able partners to help MSPs standardize internal processes, improve profitability, and dramatically enhance IT service delivery.

The Runbook is based on N-able's extensive work and research with over 3,000 MSPs around the world. By surveying top performing, high growth Partners, N-able has documented and consolidated best IT practices and processes in the industry's first ever Technician Runbook. These processes establish the standard operating procedures and knowhow that your technicians can follow regardless of experience and knowledge.

Automation Manager – the industry's first MSP Automation Suite

The extensive research and insight gleaned from documenting best IT practices in the Technician Runbook is efficiently leveraged by Automation Manager: the industry's first true, drag-and-drop 'MSP automation studio'. The driving purpose behind Automation Manager is to provide real 'out-of-the-box' automation

for the majority of MSP practices – or enable you to quickly and easily automate your own unique processes to differentiate your business. In essence, Automation Manager automates – with one button – the tasks that are traditionally performed by a senior lead tech.

The combined power of Automation Manager coupled with the best practice Technician Runbook enables our Partners to maximize the number of customers they

have under management – with the same technician headcount.

This is why Automation Manager – in conjunction with the Technician Runbook – is a major productivity breakthrough for the Managed Services industry. Now you can ensure technicians deliver scalable, repeatable IT services to a consistent standard.

To learn more about N-able Technologies and the game changing, breakthrough productivity gains that are now possible with Automation Manager, visit www.n-able.com.

ABOUT N-ABLE TECHNOLOGIES

N-able Technologies, Inc. is a leading global provider of complete IT management, Automation and MSP business transformation solutions. N-able N-Central® is an award-winning RMM and MSP Service Automation Platform. N-able has a proven track record of helping MSPs standardize and automate the setup and delivery of IT services in order to achieve true scalability. N-central is backed by comprehensive business enablement support services and a unique freemium licensing model. Thousands of MSPs use N-able solutions to deliver scalable, flexible, profitable managed services to over 100,000 SMBs worldwide. With offices in North America, the Netherlands and Australia, N-able is 100% channel-friendly and maintains strategic partnerships with Microsoft®, Intel®, IBM®, CA®, and Cisco® among others

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