Making a mark in managed services

Managed services and datacentre leasing have become viable options for organisations that want to improve IT efficiency while also reducing the risk and management costs of their technology infrastructure. Yasser Zeineldin, CEO at eHosting DataFort, one of the largest managed services providers in the regional market, answers the questions that all CIOs have on their minds when it comes to considering the outsourced model today.

Give us some background on eHDF. How would you describe the company?
eHosting DataFort is a leading provider of managed IT and advisory services, and a member of TECOM Investments, Dubai Holding. With more than 500 customers to its name, eHDF operates world-class datacentres, state-of-the-art infrastructure and 24/7 managed operations.
    With a wide network of technology and channel partners based in the GCC, MENA, Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific region, eHDF delivers its services through highly reliable and scalable infrastructure following international standards and best practices.

What is your firm's specific area of specialisation?
eHosting DataFort offers services in two key areas: managed IT services and advisory services. Managed IT services would include datacentre services (co-location and managed co-location), managed hosting services, dedicated servers, managed services, managed security services, managed databases, managed storage services, managed back-up and restore services, managed exchange, IT administration services and disaster recovery.
    Advisory services include consulting and advisory services, security, vulnerability and risk assessment, business impact analysis, and datacentre auditing and consulting.

Talk us through some of the aspects that make your offering different to competing providers.
There are a number of differentiating factors that make eHDF stand apart from its competitors in the region, the first being stability and trust. Founded in 2001, eHDF is one of the earliest managed IT and advisory services

providers in the region. Our industry experience extends to global clients in various verticals: financial and banking, government, IT, electronics, telecom, aviation, retail, real estate/construction and media.

In terms of infrastructure, we own and operate state-of-the-art tier-three datacentres and have a fully redundant infrastructure that is reliable, scalable and secure. We have a team of domain and technical experts who are highly knowledgeable, committed and experienced and completely focused on keeping customers' critical applications and infrastructure working 24/7.

We also have partnerships with the leading vendors across the globe, including major players like Cisco, Microsoft, HP, IBM, Dell, BMC and EMC, all of which are capable of providing holistic technology solutions.

Customers come in all shapes and sizes – from small businesses to large enterprises. Does your offering cater to everyone or are you focused on a particular demographic?
Absolutely. Before the economic downturn hit, it was perceived that managed IT services tended to be more relevant and more worthwhile for enterprises. However, the tide has turned and smaller-sized businesses are now realising the value in looking to third party IT service experts who can take care of their IT operations. The liquidity crunch has created even more opportunities for SMBs to have their IT infrastructure managed by a services provider because they need to do more with less. Most companies are looking to move from investing in upfront CAPEX to an OPEX model, which allows companies to 'pay as you go' and reduce overall risks.

A guaranteed level of service is also offered with managed service providers offering high-end service level agreements. eHDF finds that companies prefer to spend on

predictable monthly expenses to host services elsewhere than spending on building a datacentre of their own that would inevitably cost more. Finally, the global economic shift has led to consolidation and has resulted in a reduction of players, providing vendors the opportunity to support performers, weed out the non-performing players and optimise channel structures.

When it comes to leasing a datacentre, how can customers be assured that their data isn't compromised? And what sort of SLAs would typically be put in place?
eHDF offers high-end service level agreements (SLAs) to ensure the customer with guaranteed uptime and availability. Accreditations in assurance and best practices also make us one of the few service providers in the world to have obtained the prestigious ISO 9001, ISO 20000, ISO 27001, ISO 14001, ISO 18001 and ITIL certifications.

What kind of Middle East enterprises have been adopting the leasing model so far?
Enterprises across the Middle East region and industry verticals have taken to leasing data centres and adopting managed IT services.

From government, banking and finance, aviation, oil and gas to automobiles, media, technology and steel, eHDF's portfolio of customers reflects the breadth and diversity of sectors and size of companies it currently offers IT services to.

How extensive is your managed services portfolio and how do you intend to develop it in future?
eHDF offers customers a complete stack of managed IT services ranging from dedicated servers to a fully managed services option whereby a customer's entire IT infrastructure is managed right
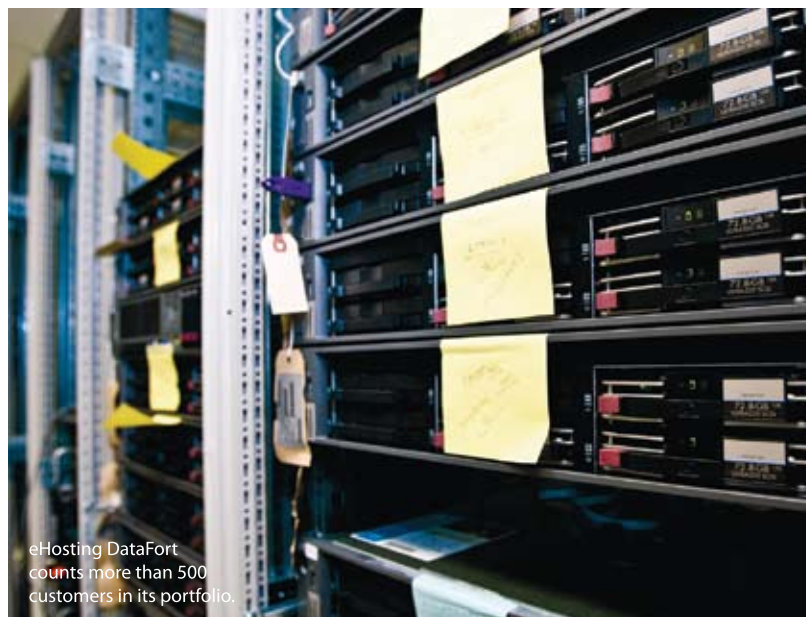
eHosting DataFort counts more than 500 customers in its portfolio.

from the datacentre layer to the application layer and everything in between, including network, servers, storage, back-up and security. eHDF has a constant quest to improve value to its customers by launching new services and product offerings, such as disaster recovery/business continuity, remote infrastructure management and content distribution networks.

In an ever evolving technological era, eHDF's datacentre is designed to respond to future computing demands, such as virtualisation, software-as-a-service, infrastructure-as-a-service and cloud computing.

What do you believe are the biggest challenge facing the managed services market in the Middle East and Africa region today?
The cultural mindset of data confidentiality. Based on customer feedback, companies in the Middle East feel that data should not be stored outside of their premises or managed by a third party company.

However, we are seeing a shift in this perception. I often give this analogy to my customers: If you have a lot of money, would you consider putting it into a bank or leave it at home underneath your mattress? I know which one I would choose.

Choosing a managed service provider

Five top tips that every company should bear in mind before choosing to work with a managed IT service provider:

1) Evaluate the credibility of the service provider

2) Check the service provider has good references from its customers

3) Ensure the service provider has a guaranteed level of services offering high-end service level agreements (SLA)

4) Conduct a due diligence audit of their existing IT infrastructure - this will assess the areas of IT that can remain in-house and what can be outsourced

5) Ensure the service provider meets the specific needs of the nature and size of your company