SMB SOLUTIONS
TO GROW

For many a small and medium business (SMB) customer, the desire to buy new technology is determined by limited funds and the business pain points that affect their operations. However, the market for small business IT services is large, extremely varied and challenging to address. By MANDA BANDA

For many channel partners adjusting their IT channel strategy to meet the needs of SMBs has meant that they have to embrace offerings that include cloud and BYOD management offerings.

Channel organisations of various sizes may need to overcome technical and financial obstacles among their SMB customers to encourage them to acquire and adopt new technology and services.

IT channel partners feel the immediate effects of any tech trend change in market forces or business operations and have to adjust their business strategy accordingly. In the last five years, a lot has changed in IT, including the advent of cloud computing, the massive adoption of virtualisation, mobile computing platforms and era of the Internet of Things (IoT).

This shift has continued to bring opportunities to the channel, including an increase in demand for wireless services, cloud-based storage, desktop virtualisation infrastructure, mobile device management and more, with each new trend using new infrastructure and software services.

All this technology investment is closely linked to the business pressures that SMBs are facing, whether it's improving productivity, customer satisfaction, or acquiring new clients, or managing the uncertainty of dealing with competitive pressure.

According to a new study by MENA Research Partners (MRP), the small and medium businesses (SMBs) in the GCC region are forecast to grow by 156% in the next five years from 2017 to 2022, with the sector set to be worth $920bn.

MRP added that the SMB sector in the Gulf will employ 22m people in five years.

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" The SMB is by far the strongest performing sector for D-Link and for this reason, the company is encouraging partners that serve this market segment to help their customers upgrade to new IT infrastructure. **"**
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While the GCC region accounts for 34% of SMBs in the Middle East and North Africa, it has the largest potential for SMBs regionally, the study noted.

It added that the SMB sector in MENA is estimated at around $1trn per year.

Khalid Khan, director cloud and midmarket, Middle East, Africa, South Europe and APAC at Avaya, said SMBs are some of the most important influencers in the Middle East's economic trajectory.

According to Khan, their contribution to job creation, industrial diversification, and other national transformation strategies is vital to the region's development. "Both public and private sector entities realise this and are continuing to launch initiatives that support the SMB community," he noted.

Sakkeer Hussain, director - Sales and Marketing, D-Link Middle East and Africa (MEA), said the SMB market is one of the strongest segments in this region and there are a lot small and medium sized companies spread throughout the region.

Hussain said the SMB is by far the strongest performing sector for D-Link and for this

reason, the company is encouraging partners that serve this market segment to help their customers upgrade to new IT infrastructure. "D-Link has one of the broadest product range to cater to the SMB and mid-market sector," he said.

Ahmed Sousa, regional manager, solutions architect, META at Polycom, said SMBs in the Middle East operate in a highly competitive environment where a deal of any size is important, and can make or break the business. Sousa added that Polycom helps SMBs flourish in their respective industries by offering them a wide range of collaboration solutions that can be customised and scaled alongside as their business grows. "This protects the investment they are making in technology which is a bonus for stretched operating budgets," he said.

While the SMB market has so much potential, small business still face some barriers to technology adoption across the region.

Maya Zakhour, head, Distribution and Alliances, Middle East and Africa at NetApp, explained that despite many SMBs moving past the discovery phase, cloud maturity levels remain relatively low. Zakhour said keeping

pace with the ongoing digital transformation can be intimidating to SMBs but embracing technological innovation through digital transformation enables them to achieve unprecedented levels of growth, while unearthing new revenue streams using data insights and saving time through digitisation of routine business processes. "In many industries, digital transformation is already being driven by small businesses that take calculated risks and respond faster than their larger competitors," she said.

Rohan Tejura, area vice president, Centra Hub, said SMB outfits are rapidly embracing business process governance technology in automating their processes across operations. Tejura added that channel partners play an important part in providing awareness and consultancy to SMB clients. "It is imperative that channel partners carefully understand target businesses, evaluate the must-have components in the digital governance process, adequately demonstrate the same to the clients and structure a feasible and realistic scope within the parameters of budget, personnel, timelines and need of clients," he said. "This will ensure a high percentage of technology

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adoption within their target audiences."

With the rapid pace at which technology is evolving in the Middle East, most small businesses have failed to keep up with the speed at which this change is happening.

Sachin Bhardwaj, director, Marketing and Business Development, eHosting DataFort, explained that forward thinking SMB owners and managements are strategically embracing technology to streamline processes and restructure their business models for greater profitability. However, noted Bhardwaj, continuous changes in the technology landscape, from software to hardware, cyber security to data recovery solutions are making it extremely difficult for SMBs to manage and maintain their IT infrastructure in-house.

Avaya's Khan pointed out that SMBs have unique communication requirements, and cloud-based solutions are ideal to deliver flexible features, functions and value without compromise. "For technology providers in particular, I think there's a responsibility to work with the channel to explain to SMBs how they can enjoy the rich communication experiences they would expect from on-prem-

ises solutions now being delivered as cloud-based offerings," he said.

He added that to help SMBs take advantage of these benefits, Avaya has invested a lot into migration services that can help business owners make sense of what's right for them and how to set a path forward.

"Avaya has recently introduced its latest release of Avaya IP Office, which provides a single app to access all the required tools to efficiently connect, communicate and collaborate, from anywhere, at any time and from any device," he said. "At a time when thousands of SMBs across the region are trying to figure out how to do more with less, Avaya supported the latest release of IP Office with key capabilities from Avaya Equinox, our signature enterprise-level UC experience that now includes flexible cloud deployment options specifically designed for SMBs."

Pundits say channel partners have a huge role to play in guiding their SMB customers to adopt solutions that help their businesses.

D-Link's Hussain added that: "I believe channel stakeholders have a role to play in helping their SMB customers by educating

and guiding them on the latest products and solutions, and most importantly helping them to embrace some of the services be they (cloud services, managed services, outsourcing or professional services)."

He said by offering these to SMB customers, they will be helping them to focus on their core business while they take the responsibility of managing their networking infrastructure. "D-Link manufactures solutions in the IP surveillance, wireless, switching, storage, security, cloud, VoIP, print servers, structured cabling, digital home, 3G/4G routers, power over Ethernet kits, powerline, KVM, structured cabling and digital SMB offerings," he said. "With such a broad product array, we have all the solutions that cater to SMBs and help them to overcome some of the tech adoption barriers."

At NetApp, Zakhour believes success in the digital transformation era is determined by the way businesses and not just SMBs leverage data. "Enterprises need cloud data solutions that deliver enhanced application performance with uninterrupted data availability to get ahead of the competition and cut down time to market," she added. ■