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# GAINING IMPETUS

*Software as a Service (SaaS) is rapidly changing the IT landscape in the Middle East. Applications and processes that have traditionally been on-premises are now becoming externalised, provided by third parties and solution providers via the cloud but where do opportunities lie for resellers? By MANDA BANDA*



**S**oftware as a Service (SaaS) is rapidly changing the IT landscape in the Middle East. Applications and processes that have traditionally been on-premises are now becoming externalised, provided by third parties and solution providers via the cloud. While this ultimately brings many benefits in terms of cost, space and efficiency, transitioning to this new reality can be tumultuous for IT management.

For solution providers with the right skills and business model, the SaaS market in the Middle East is offering them endless opportunities as the region shifts towards services and software.

According to analyst IDC, organisations of all sizes are embarking on digital transformation journeys, changing their operating models and even their business models in the process. To succeed, said IDC these organisations need to rethink their technology strategy and build a solid digital core.

The research firm said this has led to the embrace of cloud computing and software as a service (SaaS) because organisations need flexible, agile software systems that are configurable, continuously updated, quick to implement, available anywhere and anytime,

and highly scalable.

IDC added that part of the beauty of SaaS and cloud-enabled software is that relatively heavy configurations can be made and software extensions (custom apps) can be added without the core product being affected.

Zakaria Haltout, head, Global Channels and General Business, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), SAP, said the Middle East's SaaS market is rapidly growing, with organisations increasingly running cloud-based applications for real-time visibility and insights to optimise costs, collaboration, and efficiency.



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SAVITHA BHASKAR, COO, CONDO PROTEGO

Haltout noted that the biggest shifts have seen Middle East organisations working with channel partners to develop cloud-native applications, and to adopt a cloud-first approach with SaaS alongside platform-as-a-service (PaaS) and emerging technologies such as blockchain as a service.

“Channel partners should first identify the business challenges that SaaS can meet,” he said. “Channel partners need to rapidly change their own business models to move from merely selling and building solutions, to developing digital transformation roadmaps, bundling solutions that can meet a customers’ specific business use cases, and exchanging skills to help the customers’ staff to support the projects.”

Savitha Bhaskar, COO, Condo Protego, said the Middle East has passed the early adopter phase for SaaS, with organisations proactively taking a cloud-first approach, especially with technology vendors offering more SaaS options than ever before.

Bhaskar said Middle East solutions providers should not be afraid of SaaS, but should rather take a customer-centric approach that sees them understand customer issues and build solutions that help them meet these needs, and consider the entire application lifecycle. “From a solutions



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provider perspective, SaaS, even if not on-premise, is similar to on-premise deployments, with implementation and support still needed,” he said.

Ahmed Sousa, regional manager and solutions architect, MEA and Turkey, Polycom, said SaaS solutions are increasingly being offered in more flexible platforms thanks to managed services and cloud platforms.

Sousa said with up to 95% of businesses in Dubai falling into the SMB category, SaaS solutions are a perfect match due to their relative affordability and easy implementation in existing enterprise networks. “With more enterprises in various industries investing in software solutions to enhance productivity, there is a tremendous opportunity for the ‘as a service’ model in the region,” he said.

Given that channel partners always cite skills as one of the barriers inhibiting their progress in the SaaS space, how are vendors guiding them on the skills path?

Condo Protego’s Bhaskar said the biggest challenge among resellers is that most of them are still predominantly box movers. “Resellers in this bracket need to build their consultative capabilities and become more solutions-focused. In building a successful SaaS practice, solutions providers need to take a cloud-first strategy, and



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with an understanding of how SaaS can meet business needs, availability, and performance,” she said. “Cloud is not a threat to their business, but rather an opportunity towards greater levels of pre-sales and post-sales consultation.”

According to solutions providers do not face a major SaaS skills challenge, as SaaS deployments have the same skills set requirement as on-premise deployments. “Condo Protego continues to take a consultative approach. Whenever we work with customers, we offer them a SaaS option alongside on-premise solutions,” she said.

Sousa added that resellers and system integrators need to ensure that the solution fits the business challenges so the enterprise has both financial and business benefits from any SaaS deployment. “They need to bear in mind that the processes they are working with are usually mission critical and so deployment needs to reflect this,” he noted. “It is crucial for channel partners to be able to offer the level of support that customers need, so working with a vendor that has strong cloud-based solutions in place becomes essential.”

With selecting the right vendor or cloud distribution partner crucial for any channel partner that want to win in this sector, pundit say



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NICOLAI SOLLING, CTO, HELP AG

it's vital for solutions partners to choose vendors and distributors with the right SaaS credentials.

SAP's Haltout said as the field of SaaS changes rapidly, channel partners should align with leading SaaS vendors in gaining the knowledge and practical experience in deploying SaaS projects. "SAP's PartnerEdge channel partner training programme is seeing strong Middle East growth in enabling channel partners in the latest SaaS trends," he said. "To support the Middle East SaaS adoption and nationwide digital transformation, we recently launched public cloud data centres in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to adopt SaaS solutions localised to 25 different industries."

Guruprit Ahuja, CEO and co-founder, RackNap, said the key to success as a SaaS provider lies in understanding the needs of your customers and providing them with an easy-to-use solution.

Ahuja said this should not be a one-time task, but the service provider needs to make continuous improvements based on feedback from the customers using their SaaS application. "Ensuring that the customers are always having a wonderful experience with the solution will help service providers in building successful SaaS business models," he said.



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Ahuja said the advent of cloud has paved the way for growth of the SaaS market and in future, almost all IT solutions will be delivered using the SaaS model.

Sousa said Polycom works closely with and offers a lot of support to system integrators and resellers. "The Polycom Choice Partner Programme provides a simple framework for partners to invest and grow in," he said. The programme gives knowledge, support and tools to help integrators deploy their solutions. In addition, partners are rewarded with more benefits as their commitment to Polycom increases."

With the SaaS market gaining impetus in the Middle East, it's vital for solution providers that want to succeed in this segment to identify the right verticals where they can develop domain expertise.

Yasser Zeineldin, CEO, eHosting DataFort, said with extensive experience in the cloud infrastructure business since 2001, the company has seen a tremendous growth of the SaaS market in the region.

Zeineldin said the digitisation across the Middle East which is being spearheaded by government initiatives is one of the most significant factors that is pushing the growth of SaaS. "Along with that,



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most technology vendors are offering SaaS based solutions to cater to the growing need of accessing data anywhere anytime," he said.

showcase their use of IT advancements.

Nicolai Solling, CTO, Help AG, said for many systems integrators and VARs, assuming the role of a managed services provider could be the best starting point.

Solling said the typical arrangement here would be for the channel player to purchase several subscriptions from the cloud vendor and then add its own services and margins before offering this to the customer. "This will allow the channel organisation to provide the customer services without the hassle of having to build a platform from scratch," he said.

Solling said that with cloud services, it is the ongoing support that is critical to long term success. "One of our differentiating factors at Help AG has been our technical assistance centre with advanced 24 by 7 technical support services," he said. "We constantly fine-tune this offering and our customers can not only open service request tickets via phone, email and web, but also, they can avail of our onsite services around the clock with a 2-hour response time within the UAE. ■"