Onboarding Success

How to Avoid Delivery Issues, Streamline Implementations and Delight Customers

At a Glance

Onboarding can often be a make-or-break proposition, one that can play a deciding role in the ultimate success of a new engagement. At this early stage, the cost of failure can be steep. However, unless the proper foundation is in place, the odds of a successful onboarding experience for the customer may fall somewhere between slim and none. This strategy brief looks at the requirements that the service provider needs to address—before the onboarding process ever gets started.

"Wrongboarding": A Worst-Case Scenario

Acme, a regional service provider, won a new deal, but that's where the good news stopped. Once the deal was signed, Acme's teams got started with the onboarding process, and chaos ensued.

The sales representative said yes to a lengthy list of customer requests, most of which were new to the Acme team. Because this was uncharted territory, the operations teams effectively had to build the infrastructure and capabilities from scratch. Faced with a steep learning curve, engineers made some critical mistakes and delays ensued.

Before the ink on the deal was dry, sales, management and operations were consumed with discussions, questions and debates concerning what was included in the service purchased and what needed to be billed separately. What's worse is that this internal confusion resulted in inconsistent messages getting to the customer, which led to several misunderstandings and disputes with the client.

While sales promised the customer's team that the service would be up and running in "a couple weeks," the reality is that the service wasn't operational for two months.

After repeatedly coming up short of the client's expectations, Acme's credibility was seriously compromised. This one-off deal meant that all the infrastructure investment that had to be made may never be leveraged with other accounts. Up-front expenses are high, so breaking even on the service may take years, if it happens at all.

Introduction: Criticality of Onboarding

Onboarding represents a critical point in the managed services engagement, a time where the service provider has to deliver on its claims and commitments. No matter how impressed the client may have been by the account team and executives involved in closing the deal, the onboarding process will serve as the client's ultimate litmus test in determining whether they made the right decision.

As a result, even relatively minor hiccups during onboarding can be amplified for the client, a trigger that can arouse doubt, suspicions or concerns. If more significant issues, delays or misunderstandings arise, it can damage the provider's credibility, and set a negative tone that may permanently taint the relationship, potentially even leading to non-renewals or early contract terminations. On the other hand, if the onboarding process goes smoothly, it can set the stage for long-term loyalty and satisfaction.

Onboarding success doesn't start once the deal's signed. If the proper groundwork isn't established, onboarding can be difficult, if not completely doomed to failure. The following section describes the key elements that set the stage for successful onboarding efforts. These elements should be instituted before any deal is signed.

Before the Sale: Key Foundational Requirements

Before your sales representatives start hitting the phones and drumming up business for your managed services, your service provider business would be well served by making sure the following requirements are in place:

Standardized, Well-Defined Service Offerings

Effective managed service solutions aren't drawn up by a sales rep on the client's whiteboard. Service providers need to build pre-packaged service offerings based on the input and collaboration of all key areas of the business, including business operations, customer success, marketing, sales and service delivery teams. Based on this work, the initial deliverable is the service catalog, which is a concrete, detailed definition of each service offering.

The service catalog should make clear what's included, what's not and what the service will cost. If the customer has requirements beyond the standard offering, those services can be delivered via project-based rates or a la carte pricing.

The service catalog represents the initial blueprint that operations can use to start development work. Through the service catalog, sales can know what it is they are selling. The service catalog should also function as a platform that marketing uses to develop their promotions and content.

Well-Defined Operational Processes

Operations and onboarding teams need runbooks and other process documents that spell out the specific processes for configuring and implementing each discrete service. For example, a run book for a monitoring service would include such details as which metrics are tracked, specific thresholds, how to handle alerts, how dashboards are developed and so on.

This documentation enables repeatable and possibly automated methods for the actual technical deployment. This documentation is critical to setting the foundation for standardization and delivering consistent, predictable results across client engagements. This ensures that no matter which engineer is deploying the solution, you will have the same configurations being deployed for every implementation—setting the stage for more efficient troubleshooting and ongoing administration.

Sales Training

Sales training represents a critical step. Particularly if an organization is making the move from VAR to managed service provider, sales representatives may be solely accustomed to selling product. This often means that when new service offerings are being sold, sales representatives tend to focus their sales efforts on the products that support the service. For example, if selling a monitoring service, the representative may effectively try selling the capabilities of the organization's monitoring platform.

That's why it's so important that sales teams are trained to sell the service, not simply the tools. They need to understand how to sell the organization's expertise and experience and how to differentiate the business and its offerings from competitors. Look at this way: if a competitor buys the same tools, how does your organization differentiate its offerings and ultimately provide a better service?

If your organization is delivering a monitoring service, underscore the assets that help inform the service—such as well-defined monitoring governance policies, best-practice standards and related experience—and articulate how these attributes ultimately result in timely, actionable data that benefits the client's business.

Key Requirements During and After the Sale

Both during and after the sale, there are additional requirements that help set the stage for onboarding success.

Set Clear and Realistic Expectations

Customer expectations for service rollouts should be managed consistently throughout sales and onboarding processes. Once sales teams are trained and services are clearly defined, everyone working with the customer should have a clear understanding of how long implementation should take. If your operations team needs 30 days for an implementation to get up and running successfully, that timeframe should be consistently communicated. Timeframes should be reiterated and then mapped to a more detailed schedule once the kick-off meeting happens with the customer, deployment project manager and customer success manager.

Start with Standard Services

While the offerings defined in the service catalog will have standard components, many customers will have requests for specialized capabilities or services, which are handled on an a la carte basis. For example, as part of an identity and access management service offering, a customer may require integration of a single sign-on platform with a custom application.

Up front, plan to deploy the standard offering as part of the initial implementation and only after that implementation is complete, start with any custom or add-on services—and make a point to ensure the customer is clear that this is the way the rollout will happen. This approach offers several benefits:

- **Streamline implementation**. By starting with the standard service, the list of "moving parts" can be minimized, helping streamline deployment. The onboarding team will have clarity on the processes required to get operational, minimizing any potential learning curves, unexpected variables and so on.

- **Get a quick win**. This approach enables the provider to get the standard service fully operational, establish baselines and start demonstrating value—before the extra efforts and potential complexity of custom solutions are introduced. Initial deployment and time to value can be accelerated, which helps build confidence with the client's staff. Further, this acceleration means your organization gets the customer operational faster, so you can start billing sooner.

- **Refine requirements**. Through this initial deployment, the implementation team will get a better picture of the client infrastructure and their requirements, which will allow them to make more informed recommendations for improvements, fixes

or additional capabilities and services. Further, through this initial implementation, the customer will gain some lessons as well. For example, an engineer who has made a request for the capture of custom monitoring metrics may see that those details aren't a key requirement once he or she starts to work with the dashboards and reports delivered as part of the standard service.

Conclusion: The Payoff

By adopting the approaches above, service providers can significantly improve their chances of managing onboarding efforts effectively. These approaches can help not only boost the rates of onboarding success, but build scalability, repeatability and standardization in the business. As a result, service providers can start to see improved customer satisfaction, higher margins, higher renewal rates and deeper, more strategic client engagements.

About This Document: Developed by the CA Service Provider Center of Excellence

This document has been written by the CA Service Provider Center of Excellence team and is intended to provide our service provider partners with the guidance they need to address some of their most pressing challenges. Our team has rich expertise in service provider businesses, strategic consulting, technical deployments, sales and marketing. Our documents are informed by the Center of Excellence team's extensive experience over the past ten years in helping build successful service provider businesses and by interviews with some of our most successful service provider partners. This document is provided for informational purposes only and on an as-is basis. The guidance and results described herein are based on the unique experiences of our staff and partners, and may not be applicable to all organizations.

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