

The Buddy System

In the journey towards global standardization, get a travel companion who knows the territory

There is a kind of IT full of serendipity—it's called independent travel. It's fine for wanderers who don't care about their destination or schedule. But in the kind of IT with which we're most familiar, it's best to have a guide who knows the territory. That was the philosophy of ICON, Inc., a global provider of outsourced development services to the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device industries.

When the IT department of ICON's Clinical Research division embarked on an expedition to standardize its global desktops with a single hardware independent image, it signed up with a guide who knew the territory. "In the past, ICON typically operated on a

By Howard Baldwin

more regional basis," says Michael Anderson, manager of IT operations, even though its 5,150 employees work in 63 locations in 33 countries. "We've gone through a rapid effort to globalize our IT and support efforts. As part of that, we realized we needed an enterprise management solution to help us with those initiatives."

Anderson worked closely with Scott Hardie, vice president of technology services at XCEND Group, an IT and security consulting firm and the Altiris Platinum Partner of the Year in 2007, headquartered in Brighton, Michigan. In early 2006, they began deploying Altiris' Service & Asset Management Suite and Client Management Suite from Symantec, and then added the Altiris Helpdesk Solutions module later that year. Their goal: to make the journey successful, without surprises.

Weeding out the rogues

ICON represents a unique kind of outsourcing: it serves pharmaceutical companies worldwide in the planning, management, execution, and analysis of clinical trials. "In a highly fragmented industry, we are one of a small group of organizations with the capability and expertise to conduct clinical trials and development projects on either a local or global basis," says Anderson. And that mandates an IT department that is equally efficient.

To do that, ICON's IT group, led by Todd Czajka, the vice president of Global IT Operations, to whom Anderson reports, tackled two key tasks. It first had to determine what assets ICON had and what applications already existed on those computers, not only to replace them properly, but also to identify unnecessary applications. And second, ICON wanted to improve its service-level agreement performance. That's where XCEND came in to help Anderson, who is responsible for the U.S. region, and his two other counterparts, one responsible for Europe and the other for the rest of the world.

Immediately, Service & Asset Management Suite identified assets that were, to put it kindly, superfluous. "We were able to identify assets we didn't even know we had," says Anderson. "It gave us a global overview of what we're managing from a hardware standpoint." The same insights occurred when it came to software. "We were able to identify what applications were installed, see whether they were approved, or pinpoint what we consider to be rogues." Among the nearly one hundred applications they found, "there were quite a few we weren't aware of," he adds.

Anderson also fired up Altiris' application metering module, allowing them to see when people are actually using the applications. "This alone will yield significant savings because we've learned that just because someone has a piece of software doesn't mean they necessarily use it," he explains. Identifying moribund applications means IT can reduce both licensing and management costs; ensuring that only approved applications exist on a computer also reduces security risks.

Being able to analyze the computer remotely also helped. "We have a large number of remote offices that are too small to have IT staff, not to mention home-office users," says Anderson.

>> ICON's Journey to Standardization

- ▶ Altiris Asset Management Suite
- ▶ Altiris Client Management Suite
- ▶ Altiris Helpdesk Solutions
- ▶ Altiris Wise Package Studio
- ▶ Consulting from Altiris Platinum Partner XCEND Group

“Without this tool, this analysis would be almost impossible. But now we’ve found it’s not only possible but easy.”

Here’s where XCEND added its expertise. It took this analysis and created a single hardware independent image of Microsoft Windows XP, which works on every ICON desktop and laptop model, and then layered the applications based on the user’s role in the organization. This application metering solution helped identify applications that employees actually needed. “We created a Standard Operating Environment (SOE) so they could avoid managing multiple images for each hardware platform or business unit,” says Hardie, who used Altiris’ Wise Package Studio application to create the standardized build. Then, they uploaded the applications into the Altiris CMDB to create a Definitive Software Library (DSL), so ICON had a complete database for tracking applications and their usage going forward.

“You can’t do anything well without an accurate inventory,” explains Hardie. “That includes migrating information, patch management, and upgrading of equipment. Data is frequently outdated the minute it’s entered, but with the Altiris application pulling in inventory data on a consistent basis and comparing it to the baseline, you always have a clear picture.”

Tailor-made solution

Another facet of ICON’s efforts to serve a global community consistently relates to the Altiris Helpdesk Solution. ICON had a previous help-desk application, which, in Anderson’s view, was more appropriate to smaller companies and ICON’s previously decentralized IT model. “We simply outgrew it,” he says.

But deploying a global helpdesk application also has its challenges, especially relating to

accommodating multiple countries, Anderson notes.

“Our IT department operates on a standard business day, but to provide accurate reporting for a service-level agreement, you have to know whether it’s the middle of the business day for the location that’s reporting the incident.” Similarly, not everybody follows a U.S. holiday schedule. Setting up such a timetable was a huge challenge, and though Anderson knew the Altiris application was highly customizable, once he’d mapped out all the requirements, he “didn’t see any way we were going to accomplish it.”

Again, Hardie brought XCEND Group’s expertise to address the challenges. “Every company has its own unique processes, but most products can’t accommodate that uniqueness. We do a lot of custom development on the Altiris platform, and frequently do a lot of customization for our global customers on SLA tracking,” he says. Now, when someone looks at the application in the U.S., the date stamp of the trouble ticket reflects where the actual worker resides, not where the server console sits.

ROI—the ultimate test

ICON derived multiple benefits from its Altiris deployment. Anderson estimates that by eliminating the cost of maintaining unused applications, Altiris Service & Asset Management Suite almost entirely paid for itself, with an ROI of less than 12 months.



Michael Anderson (right), Manager of IT Operations, ICON Inc., and Scott Hardie, VP of Technology Services, XCEND Group (left)

The deployment benefited from XCEND Group’s involvement as well. With its help, ICON met its planned October 2007 launch of its global capabilities, less than 18 months after the project began. “I appreciate the efforts of the two XCEND members, Travis Krischke, regional sales manager, for his outstanding sales support and Ben Markowitz, senior technical solutions consultant, for his dedication to our project and expertise with Altiris solutions,” says Anderson. It was an expedition well-planned, well-executed, and without detours. ■

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