MSP'S GUIDE TO

Getting Started with Azure

The opportunity around Microsoft Azure is huge, but the flagship public cloud offering with its hundreds of services and unfamiliar architecture can be intimidating. Here are nine ways managed services providers can get up and running with the Azure platform. **By Scott Bekker**

A lot of the early action in the cloud for managed services providers (MSPs) has been around Software-as-a-Service (Saas) applications like Office 365. But much of the remaining upside—both for customers and Microsoft partners—is on the infrastructure side with Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) and Platform as a Service (PaaS).

The opportunity in IaaS and PaaS is in Microsoft Azure, and even though Microsoft's flagship public cloud offering has been around for eight years, it's still relatively early in the adoption cycle. In presentations, Microsoft often points out that a large percentage of Fortune 500 companies are Azure customers. The reality is that many of those deployments are pilots or departmental projects, and among smaller enterprises, midmarket customers and small and midsize businesses (SMBs), the existing investments in Azure are even less. In other words, there's still time for partners to get involved.

At the same time, the level of interest in Azure among customers is increasing now. "Over the past six to 12 months, it went from educating the marketplace, doing a lot of proof-of-concepts, to people are now ready to deploy," says Chris Pyle, CEO of Boca Raton, Fla.-based Champion Solutions Group.

A few MSPs have started to capitalize on the IaaS/PaaS opportunity with Azure. While the Microsoft public cloud technology stack with its dozens of unfamiliar services, features and bundled suites can appear to have a steep learning curve, it can actually be much quicker and easier for MSPs to get started than it first appears.

Here are nine quick hits that MSPs can use both for ramping up quick revenues and building expertise in the public cloud.

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Boost MSP profits and Azure Cloud migrations

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Eduardo Kassner, CTO for Partner Enablement & Innovation at Microsoft, has a mantra for MSPs and partners working with Azure: "Migrate, secure, automate and optimize."

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1. BACKING INTO AZURE

There's an easy way to back into the Azure business for MSPs, and that's to do something that many are doing already: Work with a backup vendor to provide business continuity and disaster recovery for customers. Many of the backup vendors are using Azure in some fashion, either as an off-site backup option as the prime off-site location, or as the sole backup location for their service. That makes those types of tools a great starting place for MSPs to get familiar with the basics of Azure for cloud backup and recovery, business continuity or Disaster Recovery as a Service (DRaaS).

2. A NEW WAY TO VDI

Another way to join hands with a vendor who does the heavy lifting with Azure and presents the MSP with an abstracted, purpose-built interface for a specific task is virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI). Pyle sums up the appeal of public cloud for VDI in one word: "Bootstorm."

The traditional way of creating VDI involved setting up a lot of on-premises infrastructure to handle the huge load that would hit the datacenter at 9 a.m. or so every morning as all of a customer's users logged on. "In the cloud, you can spread it out," Pyle says. Several vendors are creating offerings for putting those users on Azure. As an MSP, you can leverage their work for an immediate practice area while gaining expertise in Azure at your own pace, or not at all.

3. MAPPING CURRENT SKILLS TO AZURE

Eventually, the idea is to have Azure experts on your own staff who can creatively design solutions that bring business value to customers. This is one of the most intimidating areas for MSPs looking at Azure from the outside.

As the top Microsoft executive in charge of connecting partners with opportunities around Azure, Eduardo Kassner, CTO of Worldwide Channels and Programs, characterizes the effort required to get people from their existing skillsets to Azure as closer to baby steps than to giant steps.

"There's a delta of what you know versus what you need to know to get to the cloud, and it's not huge," Kassner says. The real currency for MSPs is skills, he says, and most existing skills map pretty directly to something critical in the Azure stack. "Networking concepts are exactly the same, but they're software-defined networking. A systems administrator now would be a cloud architect. A data administrator [goes from thinking] SAN and NAS to blobs, etc. With the desire to evolve, we've seen many people do it."

4. SIGN UP FOR MPN

One of the quickest, easiest and in some ways surprisingly inexpensive ways to get people skilled up on Azure is by joining the Microsoft Partner Network (MPN). Microsoft entices partners to the higher, paid tiers with substantial benefits, but for partners looking for Azure training, the free, base level of MPN has a ton of resources.

Partners can find entire playbooks on building cloud practices, technical training materials and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

5. IURs

Getting familiar with any technology requires a sandbox for playing around with it. One of the prime benefits of the higher, paid tiers of the MPN is Internal Use Rights (IURs). A longtime favorite benefit of Microsoft partners, IURs allow them to run their businesses on the Microsoft software and services that they sell to customers, such as Office 365, Dynamics 365, Windows 10 Enterprise and Windows Server. Included in the IURs are Azure monthly credits, which amount to $100 worth of Azure usage per month. Partners who earn the Cloud Platform or ISV competencies qualify for $6,000 a year in Azure bulk credits at the silver competency level, and $12,000 a year at the gold competency level.

6. DRILL DOWN ON KEY SERVICES

Looking at Microsoft's directory of Azure products can be a bit overwhelming. There are dozens of services, features and bundled suites listed at **azure.microsoft.com/en-us/services**, and Microsoft released 70 new features of Azure in May during the Build 2018 conference.

MSPs don't need to boil the ocean by becoming an expert on all of those services. Kassner says a few core offerings are essential for MSPs, and capabilities around those services can provide a solid foundation for Azure-based managed services practices. The core offerings relevant to MSPs include:

* Azure Resource Manager for managing app resources
* Automation for simplifying cloud management with process automation
* Azure Monitor for granular, real-time monitoring data of Azure resources
* Network Watcher for performance monitoring and diagnostics
* Azure Advisor for best practices recommendations
* Azure Service Health for personalized guidance and support for problems
* Application Insights for monitoring Web apps and services
* Log Analytics for collecting, searching and visualizing machine data from on-premises and cloud systems

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7. RETHINK MIGRATION

There's a tendency to think about migration to the cloud as a one-off opportunity. You take the applications or infrastructure that's at a customer's site and you put it up in the cloud. Microsoft keeps that cloud service updated on its end in perpetuity without further migrations required. Done, next customer, please.

Kassner agrees that initial migrations to Azure are a huge opportunity for MSPs, but says he finds that top Azure MSPs treat migration as an ongoing business that lasts forever. "Migration is a big deal. Migration in the cloud is constant. Migration is not just a motion of on-prem to the cloud," Kassner says.

That position makes sense when you consider those 70 new Azure features Microsoft released at Build. The old model was a migration from, say, SQL Server 2008 to SQL Server 2012, every three to five years. Now there are radical new data services launched regularly within Azure every few months. There might be an opportunity to rearchitect a customer's data for dramatically better performance from one Azure service to a different one, and that's a migration project.

8. OFFER BASELINING

Whether or not a customer has migrated to Azure, MSPs are finding opportunity in coming in to a customer site and offering a baselining service.

"You can absolutely charge for an assessment," Pyle says his company has found. Champion Solutions Group is making a business out of "getting in there, understanding what applications are cloud-ready, what infrastructure is cloud-ready," Pyle notes.

Beyond that initial assessment for a migration, Kassner says a partner baselining service can provide a lot of value because the rate of innovation is so fast.

"The baselining is very important," Kassner says. "A cloud MSP, a modern MSP, knows how to come in and do that for a customer quite well. It gives the customer an ability to, No. 1, breathe. That's when people feel drowned. If I [as a customer] try to do it, by the time I'm doing it, everything is moved ahead."

As an outsider, the MSP can come in, take that snapshot and provide an outside perspective and industry expertise. Other benefits, according to Kassner, include helping the customer figure out if they have the right staff or skills. "The customer has got to keep the house running. With existing people, do I have the right people? A cloud MSP can come in and augment your capability and help you baseline."

9. AUTOMATE, AUTOMATE, AUTOMATE

MSPs who are currently succeeding in Azure tend to be highly focused on automation, Kassner has found in researching those partners' practices. "Their mantra is to automate for a living, not to operate. They teach their customer how to automate their environment to the nth degree," Kassner says.

That Automation service in Azure is critical for this portion of the business. Examples of ways that partners are automating include setting parameters where if a machine is being used at 15 percent, it should be resized, or if 50 percent of virtual machines are using less than half of their assigned processor resources, workloads can be automatically moved around.

Across the board, Kassner says top MSPs and partners working with Azure follow another general mantra: "Migrate, secure, automate and optimize."

There is a learning curve for Azure, but Microsoft partners are creating Azure practices that flow from their existing lines of business and are generating additional recurring revenue in the process. •

Scott Bekker is editor in chief of Redmond Channel Partner.