

Review of Microsoft's Infrastructure Optimization Assessments

The Value of Alignment

After years of putting their focus on products and features, Microsoft is adopting a new tactic that takes a much more strategic look at aligning a company's business vision with ROI driven IT initiatives. "It's not that you get some product and magically you're there. It's a combination of people, processes and technology," says Samm Distasio, Director of Worldwide IO Strategy, Enterprise Strategies for Microsoft. Based on maturity models developed by Carnegie-Mellon University, MIT, and Gartner Inc., Microsoft has introduced a four stage framework targeted at defining the maturity of an IT organization and providing a plan for that organization to move up each level in the model. The maturity model concept is not a new one, and this methodology has been embraced over the years by many IT organizations such as VMware, IBM, HP, and Sun Microsystems, etc. Each model is defined a little different, but the similarities in concept give credence to its value. Microsoft's stages are defined as basic, standardized, rationalized, and dynamic, and have been applied to a business productivity infrastructure optimization (BPIO) analysis framework as well as core infrastructure optimization (Core IO). This tool is delivered in the form of an assessment that is performed either by Microsoft or a Microsoft partner.

(1) The 4 Stages of IO

Basic: Adopts technology on an as-needed and ad hoc basis. A Basic shop will often buy software based on price and features, and not consider how applications integrate with its infrastructure or fit in with a long term architectural vision. Microsoft calls a Basic IT shop a "cost center."

Standardized: Standardized shops are managed, but they lack the automation of higher-level shops. While a standardized IT shop is still a cost center, Microsoft labels it a "more efficient" cost center.

Rationalized: Here IT systems are managed, well-automated and the company has gone through the process of consolidating key pieces like servers and storage. IT is considered a strategic asset and a "business enabler."

Dynamic: In this upper-level stage, IT is a "strategic enabler" and management is "fully automated."

Return On Investment

The ROI on one of these assessments is two fold. First, a company will be more competitive with the ability to carefully plan where limited IT resources are invested by using the results of the assessment to create a culture around creating business value. Secondly, the company's strategic business vision is clearly identified, along with the most efficient steps IT needs to take to support that vision. Microsoft realizes that by offering superior products that many IT professionals turn to, they will inherently reap the benefits as IT departments mature and grow. As long as Microsoft products stay competitive in the market, it is in their best interest to facilitate more efficient businesses and intelligent design, thus promoting maturity and investment into the IT economy.

Our Response

Our position on the business value of these assessments is that the results will drive more ROI if the engineers completing the assessment are vendor agnostic on their recommendations, and keep the focus on alignment of the business vision to the IT initiatives. It is our opinion that any solution delivered with a pre-existing preference to one vendor will not be as valuable as a vendor agnostic roadmap. One MCPmag.com reader shared our concern by saying about Microsoft, “I would feel much more comfortable with IO if an independent lab performed the service. Or at least [evaluated] the IO service for conflict of interest issues.”

Microsoft did a great job of defining in industry accepted terms, the areas of IT maturity and how an infrastructure’s components evolve from basic to dynamic. However, that generalization does not provide the value potential that this model lays out. Microsoft states that some organizations will discover that they should be basic in some areas, but who really feels good about being defined and remaining stationary as a “basic cost center?” It implies that there is something better and more strategic one should be doing; despite claiming “basic” may be the right maturity. This vocabulary taps into the natural inclination for one to want to improve where labeled as lacking. There are some implications in the model, so keep in mind; the definition of dynamic is Microsoft’s, not your organization’s vision.

Our Offerings

These Core IO and BPIO Assessments have simply expanded our current service offerings beyond the more focused and targeted assessments we were already completing for our clients. The biggest differentiator of these more macro assessments is the collaboration and alignment of the IT executives to the business. More technology focused assessments often cause business leaders to not fully appreciate the results.

As a result, we fully embrace this framework and its intentions as a superior macro planning methodology and simply look to take it a step further for our clients. Instead of using Microsoft’s definition of dynamic we focus the end objective on being the client’s vision. Once we determine where you are in the maturity framework and where you want to be, we can define the roadmap with the maturity stages to determine how to most effectively achieve that vision. Sometimes that includes Microsoft technologies, sometimes it does not. Sometimes it is simply reevaluating architecture and processes, and not implementing new products at all. Microsoft really laid the groundwork for this very valuable tool, but we know that we can add to that value by fine tuning it to our clients’ visions and keeping the recommendations vendor agnostic.

1. Source: Redmondmag.com “Infrastructure Optimization For IT” January 2008