Research on the Importance of Supplier Support and Maintenance in the Smooth Operation of MFT

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Abstract: *Vendor support for software and solutions being used within a business is critical to keeping that business healthy and operational. Inadequate vendor support can trigger unwanted scenarios like an outdated and unsafe version of the software, which may not just be a vulnerability for the business but also for all their clients relying upon the software. Vendor support itself is a dependency that may turn into a vulnerability in case there is limited support provided by the vendor, delayed responses from the vendor, or the vendor discontinues providing support for a software/platform. Businesses can mitigate these vulnerabilities by establishing healthy communication and coordination protocols with the vendors, developing certain in-house capabilities to reduce dependency, and developing the right contingencies.*

Keywords: Vendor support, vendor

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, IT tools and their functionalities have become incredibly sophisticated. They have also become a core part of the operations for almost all businesses, so ensuring that all IT/software tools used within a business are maintained and updated has become mission-critical. Since few businesses have enough IT resources and personnel to maintain all these tools in-house, comprehensive vendor support, whether it comes from original developers of these tools and software or third-party vendors specializing in these tools, has become an important part of the operations for most businesses. This covers software and features used for almost all business operations, including but not limited to Managed File Transfer (MFT), whether it's dedicated software or part of a larger platform/suite of software products like IBM Sterling Integrator.

2. Literature Review

There is extensive literature on the kind of challenges a business might face with improper/inadequate IT support. This covers everything from the scenarios where a business might require timely vendor support to remain ahead of the curve and up-to-date when it comes to certain suites of applications/software products developed and maintained by vendors, which includes launching new updates [1]. Vendor support is critical to ensure the resolution of any issues that may arise with a software product/software solution, and it may be available in various forms - from remote support to onsite support, based on the particular challenge a business is facing [2]. IT vendor support can have an enormous impact on a business's IT capabilities as well as its success in certain endeavors, and the impact of poor IT support may not be limited to the business being unable to access a specific tool and may reach their productivity and output as well [3]. However, vendor support (as opposed to in-house capabilities) has certain inherent vulnerabilities as well, including the vendor going out of business, which may lead to a lack of support for a specific software/tool [4].

3. Problem Statement: Vendor Support Challenges

The need for vendor support creates a major dependency for the business, which makes it vulnerable and exposed to operational challenges in case vendor support fails to deliver. The primary problem is the dependency that the vendor support requirement creates. Every business uses a wide variety of software products and solutions, many of which are supported by the original development team/studio, while others are supported by third-party vendors that may modify, build upon, or specialize in the specific use cases of a software/tool.

In terms of managed file transfer (MFT) systems or MFT functionalities of platforms like IBM Sterling integrator, that may include configuring the Sterling File Gateway, which is an application that allows a business to transfer files with its "partners" as described in the IBM Sterling integrator. The vendor support may cover everything from installing and configuring IBM Sterling and Sterling File Gateway for specific use cases, such as a credit bureau that wishes to exchange certain files (on a predefined schedule) with some of its business partners and customers. This may include setting up automated transfers, configuring the transfer for different file transfer protocols, developing or leveraging templates for automated file transfers, etc. When these services are offered by the vendor and the business doesn't have the in-house capabilities or internal support to make necessary changes themselves, their dependency on the vendor is an inevitable vulnerability. Even if they have MFT engineers and other IT support staff capable of handling most aspects of the MFT tool/feature they are using, they might still rely on vendors to keep the software properly maintained and updated. Failing to do so may result in certain functionalities not working as intended or a lack of support from the original developers for outdated versions of the software.

Some other challenges associated with vendor support are:

Limited Support
In some cases, the vendor may not be able to provide full/complete support for a software/platform. It may stem from the level of access they have to the software, their area of expertise, or unique use case requirements. For many

platforms, the original developers may retain control over some areas of support, but they may not open them up to third-party vendors (Even if they are considered their support partners). The businesses relying solely on third-party vendors for support (for cost or any other reason) may receive a relatively limited version of it.

In some cases, vendors may have a highly focused support scope. For MFTs, this may include developing templates or automating transfers, and anything outside the scope may not be considered the vendor's responsibility. For many businesses, contracting multiple vendors to support a single platform/solution, especially if there is significant overlap in their services, may not be a smart cost decision. This may force them to be content with the limited support they have access to.

Delayed Responses

Even when vendor support is comprehensive enough, it may not always be as prompt as the business would want it to be. A vendor may respond to a business's complaints and requests regarding the software/solution they are providing support for in a delayed manner for any number of reasons. They may only offer support for limited hours during the day, there may be a time zone difference between vendor and their clients, or they may not have enough team members to work on all requests/complaints in real-time.

Any of these scenarios may result in a delayed response from the vendor, which may lead to certain operational challenges for the business. If they rely upon vendor support to resolve an issue before they can provide a service to their clients, delayed responses from vendors would trigger delayed service delivery/solutions on their end as well. In the short-term, it may simply lead to inconvenience for the business's clients, but in the long-term, it may create a negative impact like lowered Lifetime (LTV) of the customer, lack of repeat customers, delayed payments, etc. A delayed response from the vendor may evolve from an internal problem to a major business problem.

Vendor Discontinuation

Vendor discontinuation may happen for a number of reasons. The original developers of software may decide to take over support for their software, making vendors redundant. Vendors may decide to stop offering support for a specific software/solution because they may not have an adequate number of clients to justify the resources investment required to provide that support. Or the vendor may simply shift their business/service portfolio, discontinue to operate in a specific region or industry, or stop working altogether. Any of these flavors of "vendor discontinuation" may leave a business without adequate vendor support, at least until they contract with a viable alternative.

Any discontinuity or delay in vendor support can lead to a host of problems for a business, including instability or lack of security of the software system the support was for. If the vendor is not providing support or not providing timely support for software, they may not install the latest updates or patches, resulting in a volatile or unstable software product that may glitch or fail without an explanation. Similarly, a lack of timely updates to the most stable version, patches,

integrations, etc., may also make the software vulnerable from a security perspective. If it's not updated with the latest attack vectors or the most recently identified vulnerabilities are not plugged, it may be a threat, not just to the business but to the business's clients that are also connected to and rely upon that software system.

4. Proposed Solution: Comprehensive and Prompt Vendor Support

The overarching solution to this problem is comprehensive and prompt vendor support. Selecting the right vendor, establishing the right vendor communication protocols and practices, and having the right contingencies can forestall many challenges/ vulnerabilities associated with vendor support dependency [5].

The primary goal of comprehensive and prompt vendor support is to ensure that the software product/solution works at optimal conditions and is updated, patched, or fixed in real time without any unnecessary delay. In case a problem arises with the software/solution, the vendor is available and capable of solving it as soon as possible so that it doesn't lead to any operational delays for the business. Keeping the software system updated and maintained also ensures that the system is stable and secure, making it an asset for the business (and its clients) instead of a potential security vulnerability.

While choosing the right vendor for support is the best way to ensure that vendor support is a healthy part of the business and an asset instead of a liability, there are other elements of the solution that may enhance this impact.

Vendor Coordination and Orchestration

A business should focus on establishing healthy and efficient channels of communication with its vendors. Vendor coordination can ensure that both sides are updated on any modifications needed in the software system (scheduled) and that the business can reach out to the vendor with their requests and complaints in a timely manner. Understanding vendors' preferred channels of communication, their capacity, their complaint resolution protocols, support patterns and practices, and other preferences can ensure that businesses know the best way to connect and communicate with vendors.

Businesses should also have the right protocols in place to coordinate with multiple vendors at once [6]. In the case of complex platforms and systems like IBM Sterling, where a business may have a different vendor for managed file transfers and another vendor for other functionalities of the platform, it's important for the business to know who to reach out to for the resolution of its problems. If file transfer settings and templates rely upon a system-wide update, businesses should ensure that the update is performed before reaching out to the vendor responsible for file transfer elements of the platform.

In-house Capabilities

Businesses can also minimize their dependency on vendors (and their expertise) by developing at least some capabilities in-house [7]. They may not have to rely upon these in-house capabilities at all times, but in case of emergencies or when the vendor might delay the resolution of their complaint

because they have an unusually high influx of requests, the in-house resources may bridge the gap. They may allow the vendor to fix the issues remotely by mailing over a patch and using the in-house resources to run and troubleshoot that patch. Instead of hiring dedicated resources for services a vendor is already contracted to provide, offering cross-training to existing employees and allowing them to grow their skills might provide an adequate cushion against complete vendor dependency.

Contingencies

Each business that relies upon vendor support for smooth MFT and other IT operations should also develop

contingencies in case the vendor is not available, might delay their request, or has discontinued support for the software. The contingencies may include backup support systems like the original developers, in-house solutions, reaching out to vendors that may offer similar services, and protocols for identifying and contracting a new vendor in case of discontinuation. These contingencies can ensure that businesses are not left unprepared in case there are delays or blocks in vendor support.

5. Use Cases

Use Case	Challenge	Solution
Configuring Automated File Transfers (e.g., Daily exchange of credit reports with lenders)	Limited vendor expertise in specific credit bureau use cases.	Select a vendor with experience in the credit bureau industry.
	Vendors may not offer pre-built templates for credit bureau workflows.	Negotiate for customization of existing templates or development of new ones.
Applying Security Patches to MFT Software	Delayed response from vendor for critical security updates.	Establish an SLA with the vendor that outlines response time expectations for security vulnerabilities.
	Vendor discontinues support for outdated MFT versions.	Maintain a disaster recovery plan that includes migrating to supported versions or implementing alternative solutions.
Troubleshooting File Transfer Errors	Difficulty diagnosing complex errors without vendor assistance.	Develop in-house expertise for basic troubleshooting of MFT issues.
	Time zone difference between credit bureau and vendor support team.	Negotiate extended support hours or consider a geographically closer vendor.
Integrating MFT with Credit Bureau Scoring Systems	Lack of vendor support for integrations with specific credit bureau scoring software.	Choose a vendor with a strong partner ecosystem or experience with credit bureau integrations.
	Multiple vendors were involved in MFT and scoring systems, which led to finger-pointing during troubleshooting.	Establish clear communication protocols between all vendors involved.
Maintaining Regulatory Compliance (e.g., Ensuring data privacy for consumer credit reports)	Vendors may not be familiar with specific credit bureau regulations.	Conduct due diligence on vendor security practices and compliance certifications.
	Vendor security practices may not meet compliance requirements.	Partner with a vendor that offers ongoing compliance guidance.
Scaling MFT Operations During Peak Periods (e.g., High volume of credit report requests during tax season)	Vendor's support infrastructure may not be able to handle increased traffic.	Negotiate a support plan that scales with the credit bureau's transaction volume.
	Limited ability to customize MFT performance for credit bureau workloads.	Explore cloud-based MFT solutions that offer flexible scalability.

6. Conclusion

Prompt and comprehensive vendor support is critical to ensure that the MFT system and all other IT and software tools integrated into a business's operations are working smoothly and as desired. Understanding the vulnerabilities and limitations of vendor support and taking steps to mitigate those vulnerabilities can help a business maintain safe and stable versions of the software products, which are unlikely to cause any operational delays or hindrances [8].

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