How Managed Service Providers De-risk Technologies For Customers

by Timothy Prickett Morgan

When you run your own IT shop, you can only absorb new techniques and technologies as fast as your people can learn about them. Managed service providers, on the other hand, generally have a higher level of expertise and they spread the cost of learning about and investing in new technologies across hundreds to thousands to tens of thousands of customers, and they can develop expertise across different solutions, targeting various industries and use cases.

But perhaps more importantly, MSPs take the risk out of you trying something new, which makes it far more likely for you to deploy technologies even though you do not have the expertise to manage them yourself. You rent their expertise as much as you rent capacity on their clouds. Sometimes, with system management and patching services, you literally are renting their expertise.

So it is with Service Express, the third-party maintenance and managed services provider based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which over the past several years has expanded into the Power Systems business through several acquisitions. Service Express was founded in 1993 as a third party maintenance provider for DEC VAX and AlphaServer gear, and it gradually added coverage for all of the common system suppliers in the datacenter, including IBM, Hewlett Packard, Sun Microsystems, and others for break/fix services on servers, storage, and networking gear. More recently, Service Express expanded into adjacent services, including remote system monitoring and management and systems software maintenance, and these moves were bolstered by the acquisitions of Blue Chip in February 2021 and iTech Solutions and iInTheCloud in July 2022.

Today, Service Express has over 6,000 customers around the world, and it has just received an infusion of capital from Warburg Pincus to do more acquisitions, to expand to even more locations, and to support go-to-market operations with partners.

One of its key partnerships is with virtual tape library supplier FalconStor Software, and it is one that it inherited through the Blue Chip, iTech, and iInTheCloud acquisitions. Blue Chip in the United Kingdom and iTech in the United States were both using FalconStor's StorSafe VTL software to provide backup and disaster recovery services for customers, and iInTheCloud was using FalconStor VTL to host customer data and back it up.

After the acquisitions, the Service Express operations in the United States was using FalconStor's StorSafe VTL to backup data for customers using its cloud services in its datacenters in Grand Rapids and Detroit to back their data up to whichever datacenter was not their primary site.

"We wanted to expand upon that and really start to go big with backup as a service and disaster recovery as a service," explains Chad Peters, director of infrastructure solutions at Service Express. "A lot of times, customers are not ready to make a complete move to the cloud. They are not going to just give you all of their applications and databases and hope that it works. Usually, they want to get a toe in the water and test us out without fully committing. And a great entry point to the cloud is backup as a service. So we come in and improve their backups, giving them better reliability, better security, and more redundancy with their backups."

When Service Express started offering BaaS, many Power Systems customers who were early adopters were using physical tape drives and physical libraries, and they were having reliability problems and performance problems, according to Peters. The drives were failing, and the mechanics of the physical tapes or libraries were sometimes bad. And as they were upgrading their Power Systems iron and increasing their capacity and their storage, their physical backups could not keep up. Some customers had multiple systems and had tape drives hooked up to some, and libraries hooked up to others, and they just wanted to consolidate it all down. It was a no-brainer to bring in a VTL to streamline all of those backups and have one machine running StorSafe that could act as a virtual tape to any of the systems in the fleet.

"You have one piece of hardware that can now backup multiple machines, or multiple partitions in your environment," says Peters. "You do it faster thanks to better dedupe rates, and then the VTL becomes a gateway to then back that data up to a cloud provider. So now you're getting a little bit of redundancy and security behind that. That's how we got started. And the nice thing of coming from a third party maintenance background was with the flexibility that FalconStor has to run on a lot of different qualified hardware, we had a lot of access to commodity Intel servers that fit great with the FalconStor operating environment."

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Once you have backup as a service, it is an easy transition to disaster recovery as a service since the virtual tape backups are already sitting on a cloud. It is fairly simple to spin up a logical partition on a Power Systems machine, add some storage, and restore the backups to it. And from there, Service Express could offer managed backup services, and once customers get comfortable with that, the next step is remote managed services for the IBM i, AIX, and Linux operating systems on the Power Systems iron.

These BaaS and DRaaS services are now available in the United Kingdom, using the pair of datacenters that were previously owned by Blue Chip in Bedford, which is north of

London. Service Express drops an X86 server running StorSafe VTL in the customer's datacenter and it links back to a shared, multi-tenant VTL running in one of the four datacenters operated by the company to do backups and DR for those backups. And everything is encrypted end to end.

"We find StorSafe VTL to be very simple to deploy with seamless integration into a variety of environments, and easy to manage with their single-pane-of-glass interface," said Peters. "We are very happy with the product, the support we receive when we need it, and we tell all our customers to 'run towards StorSafe VTL.'"

To date, while there are some Power Systems BaaS and DRaaS customers at Service Express using AIX or Linux on, the vast majority are using IBM i and most of them do their backups with IBM's Backup, Recovery & Media Services (BRMS) software to perform the backups. BRMS, of course, interfaces seamlessly with the FalconStor StorSafe VTL – the IBM i partitions don't even know they are not talking to a physical tape drive. Customers thus far run the gamut from the OS/400 V5R4 release from 2006 all the way up to the newest IBM i 7.5 release.

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