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5 Big Tips for Running a More Productive IT Services Business
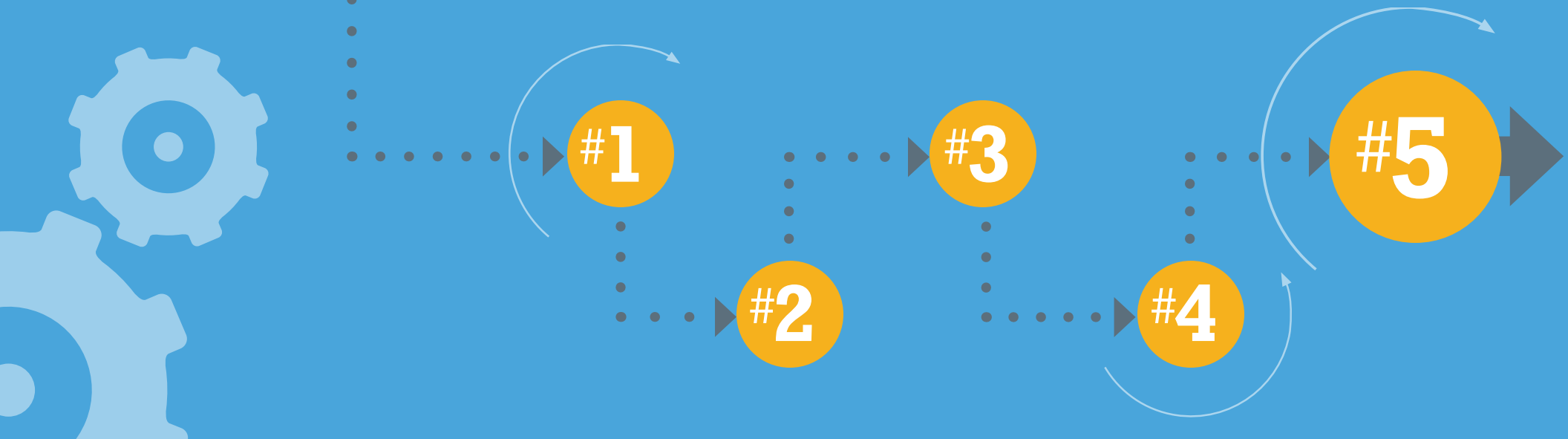
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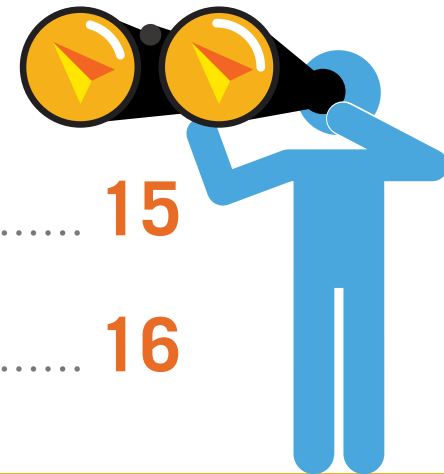
Introduction

Improving productivity is the motivating objective behind many of today's technology and business trends. It's a goal every business is chasing, and it's a factor that drives business decisions every day.

- **Productivity** is the reason why many businesses let their employees use personal devices in the workplace: 74 percent of survey respondents told tech researchers Vanson Bourne that they embrace BYOD because it enables productivity[1].

- **Productivity** is also the reason why more businesses are switching to cloud services: 59 percent of companies that use the cloud are more likely to realize productivity benefits from technology than nonusers, according to a Microsoft report[2].

- And **productivity** is the reason why many of the world's biggest technology vendors are re-evaluating their products and delivery models to appeal to customers who strive for better efficiency in the workplace[3].

Everyone wants to be more productive — IT services providers included. After all, your customers rely on your ability to deliver dependable, timely IT support so that they can keep running their businesses without interruption.

[1] "BYOD: Putting Users First Produces Biggest Gains, Fewest Setbacks," Dell and Vanson Bourne
[2] "Drivers & Inhibitors to Cloud Adoption for Small and Midsize Businesses," Microsoft
[3] "Time to shift the IT conversation back to productivity" Mike Vizard, Intronis blog

Thoughts on IT Services Productivity:

For too long, we – as an industry – have viewed managed services from an insular perspective, in that we see what managed services can do for our business. The model generates recurring, predicable revenue, and it enables solution providers to scale resources at lower expense.

Those things are true, but it doesn't go far enough to define the value delivered to customers. Instead, we must look at managed services as a means for removing burden from the customers, so they can focus on their core competencies.

The value of the managed services is efficiencies delivered, but manifested in how solution providers enable customers to grow their businesses.

— *Lawrence M. Walsh, CEO and Chief Analyst, The 2112 Group*

If a lack of productivity means you can't always be there for your customers when it matters most, then you've done a considerable disservice to your clients, and to your growth prospects as a service provider.

On a micro level, productivity is about accomplishing more with each work day. But on a larger scale, it's also about positioning your business for long-term success through better efficiency and attention to detail.

In this e-book, we've scoured expert opinions and ideas on productivity from IT industry executives and IT services providers to bring you our top tips for MSP productivity. We've recommended the technology, processes, and ideas you can incorporate in your business today to drive a more productive IT services operation.

59%of companies that use the cloud are **more likely to realize productivity benefits** from **technology** than nonusers, according to a **Microsoft report**[2].
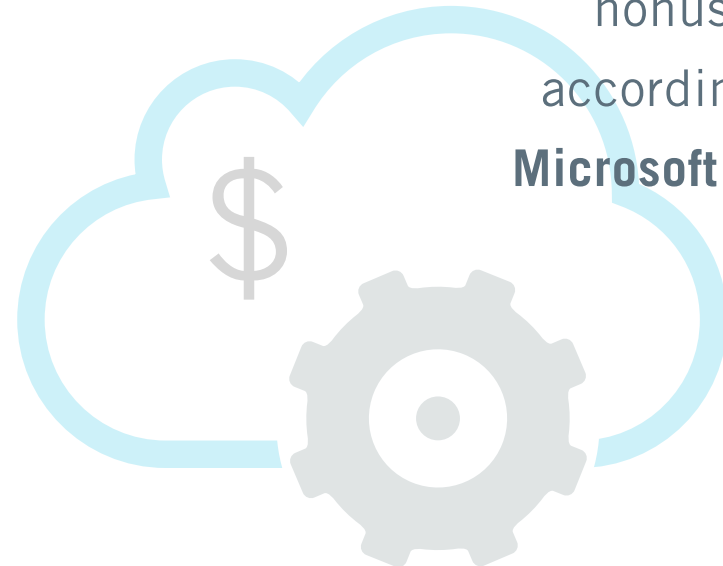
#1 AUTOMATE:

Manual tasks create a lot of potential for human error or wasted time. There are certainly going to be some tasks that cannot be entirely avoided by automation software, but these tools go a long way toward eliminating repeatable tasks that bite into your schedule.

Just how much can automation make a difference? A recent study pointed out that manual processes are notorious drivers of rework and lost efficiency. For example, one source found that automation has reduced invoice processing costs by 53 percent for some companies, and decreased clerical demands by 25 percent.[4]

Where should you start? The first step is to determine the most arduous tasks that take up your time, whether it's an IT service responsibility or a business management task.

Tasks You Can Automate:

IT billing, monitoring, management, backup and reporting can all be improved through the use of automation software, while the sky is the limit when you start thinking of other tasks—like sales and marketing—that require your attention but that you don't want to become a chore.

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[4] "Information technology and business-process redesign," Professor Mohsen Attaran, California State University Bakersfield

↘ Our Big Tip:

Rather than wasting time and money on manual tasks while simultaneously putting you at risk for more errors, consider automating business processes that take up more time than you can afford.
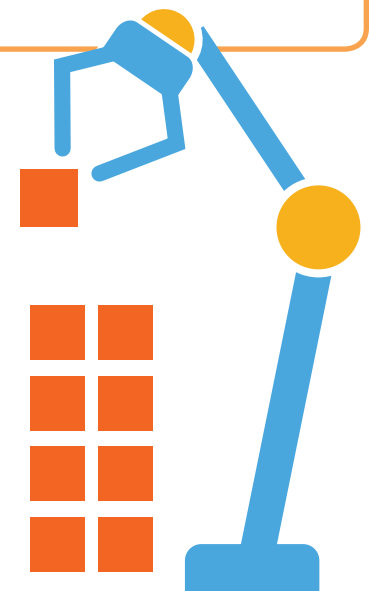
AREAS TO AUTOMATE:

What are the best automation tools to make your job easier? Here's what we suggest:

- **Professional Services Automation**—Among other processes, allows you to automatically bill and ticket your IT customers

- **Remote Monitoring and Management**—Receive automatic alerts when something happens in your clients' IT environment

- **Cloud Backup and Recovery**—Takes manual backup creation out of your hands and ensures that client data is automatically protected without your constant oversight

- **Marketing Automation**—Set a variety of marketing campaigns and actions to trigger automatically, or schedule out emails, blogs, and other marketing content

- **Customer Relationship Management**—Manage your database of leads better with tools that can trigger actions and events based on variables that you set

- **Social Media Management**—Schedule posts to Twitter, Facebook, or any other network, but be careful not to go overboard! You don't want your messages to sound robotic and repetitive
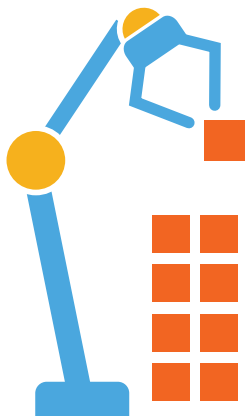
One Big Tip for MSP Productivity:

"When you talk about productivity, shortening the length of time between sale, collection, and completed project is really critical. One of the things we talk about a lot is having a sense of urgency to maximize your throughput. In an IT organization, where you're primarily supporting people, you have to be quick to respond.

We work a lot on productivity and score people on not only the ability to do their job, but also their ability to improve themselves. Training is ongoing, we encourage knowledge sharing among the senior employees, and the mentoring of younger employees.

We're constantly re-examining ourselves to make the team more productive. And that means bringing in outside consultants to analyze our process. Trying to establish systems and structure is really something that keeps you productive and without that, you're just guessing."

— *David Kolssak, President, TURNkey IT*

#2 CENTRALIZE:

When you are constantly juggling client responsibilities, it's easy for minutes and hours to slip away. It's especially challenging if you are also juggling several tools to get work done every day. Think about it—how common is it that you're running several different programs that have overlapping functions and benefits, or receiving different alerts and reports from several applications at once?

Not only does application sprawl make it hard for you to stay on top of your work and respond quickly to your clients, it also creates data risk by putting all your most important information in far too many locations.

And, decentralization can cost money. Osterman Research released the results of a study that found small businesses are using an average of 14.3 apps, leading to losses in monthly productivity worth about $15 per employee[5]. It might not seem like a lot, but when added up over time, a single change can save as much as $6,788 a year.
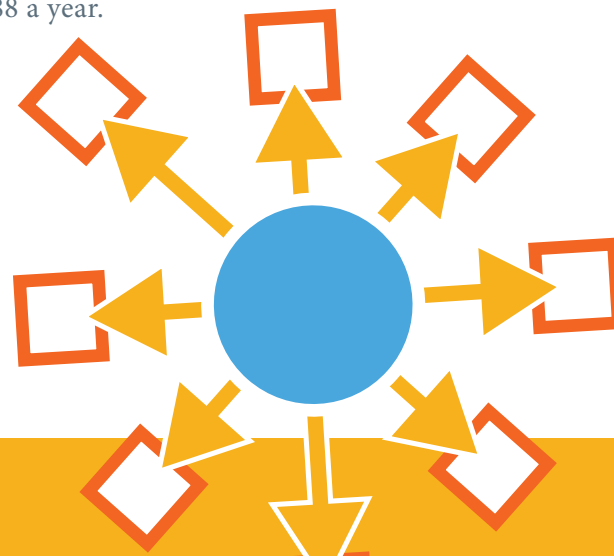
[5] "Death by 1000 Cloud Apps," Osterman Research

↘ Our Big Tip:

Work to eliminate redundant tools, centralizing business processes into a core set of tools that offer maximum benefits. That's not to say that you should completely eliminate all of your applications. But is it important to choose the right apps that help you centralize most tasks and data into a core set of tools. Osterman Research's study pointed out that a simple adjustment such as the deployment of a single sign-on portal can save companies as much as $**6,788 annually**.

WHERE TO CENTRALIZE:

Questions to Ask Before You Centralize:

- **Where are the redundancies?** Applications can become expendable if the only value they offer can be easily achieved by another, more comprehensive tool. Many partners, for example, use several backup products to protect a variety of data even though they could cover a wide range of IT environments with one platform.

- **Will this actually save us time and money?** It's possible that the process of phasing out software is more effort than it's worth. It's also possible that the software you are thinking of shedding offers more value than you realize. It's a cost/benefit balance that you must carefully tread. For example, if you dump one PSA for another, how easy will it be to transfer your contacts to the new database?

- **What are the roadblocks?** Maybe you're locked into a contract with a vendor and can't shed their redundant software. Or maybe one stakeholder or decision-maker on your team really values what that product offers. Keep these roadblocks in mind when making your judgment calls.

One Big Tip for Support Productivity:

It may seem obvious, but a happy support team is very often a productive one. Always make sure to show your team members how much you appreciate their work. Being on the front lines of customer support and response is a tough job. An expression of appreciation goes a long way toward keeping a productive team.

— *Jasmine Lombardi, Vice President of Partner Success at Intronis*
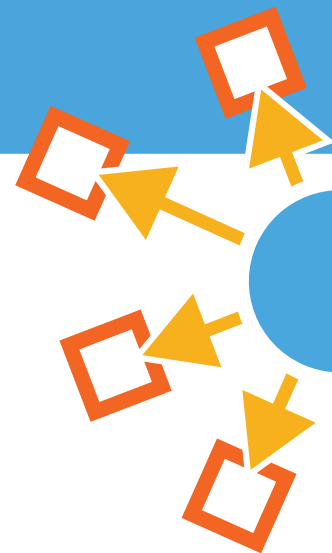
#3 ORGANIZE:

When an MSP fails to have predictable processes, there's a high potential for lost time. It doesn't take long for simple missteps to create significant issues, and improving your level of organization is often all you need to reach greener pastures.

This is especially important in the world of IT services, because your customers rely on your dependability and reliability. If you're running into snags or delays because your team is disorganized and your processes are ineffective, it will be very hard to deliver steady service that satisfies your customers.

For example, think about your first day with a new client. What do you need to do to get them established and on their feet?

You probably have to conduct some sort of IT assessment if you didn't already in the pre-sales process. You'll have to execute on the recommendations that stem from that initial assessment. That might mean bringing in new hardware, procuring new software, removing legacy equipment, collecting data, and plenty more.

Maybe you have enough faith in your operation team's expertise to let them proceed through onboarding without a documented process. But what if one of your techs leaves the company? What if your most experienced tech is out sick or on vacation when it's time to onboard?

↘ **Our Big Tip:**

Develop process plans far ahead of time so your team does not have to re-invent the wheel for repeatable tasks.

ORGANIZE AHEAD:

It doesn't hurt to commit your steps to a documented process, and in fact it can provide huge benefits with regard to employee training or knowledge sharing. Putting everything in writing can also help you identify gaps in your process or areas where you might need improvement.

Processes You Can Plan Ahead of Time:

- An on-site support response protocol to ensure that your team knows exactly how to respond when you receive a call for on-site help

- Client onboarding to ensure your team can get a new client on its feet quickly

- A step-by-step guide for performing a data restore to limit the risk of a missed step leading to a bad recovery

- Firm Recovery Point Objectives and Recovery Time Objectives so your clients know how fast to expect data recovery

- A disaster recovery best practices guide for employees to reference in the high-stress minutes and hours following a client's data disaster

One Big Tip for Creating Productive Processes:

Whenever we start working with a new customer, the first thing our technical engineer will do is create a backup. Even before our customers get sent a bill, we're working on getting them seeded into Intronis as a first step. That way, if they go down tomorrow, we have some way to recover their files. I would suggest that the second you get a new customer, think of how you can recover them.

It's also a great sales tool to be able to say 'Hey we understand your backup as currently configured is unacceptable and we're working on it now' Just so your customer knows you're thinking about it immediately. It helps us to build confidence with the customer to be able to say we're thinking about their data on Day 1.

— Zach Leffler, Sales Administrator, Internet and Telephone

#4 PLAN:

Beyond the day-to-day improvements you can make to your productivity, developing a business plan remains vitally important to your company's development as an IT services provider.

A lack of a business plan can leave you without the structure you need to move forward as a company, and a lack of structure will be easy to recognize if you find your business growth stunted or lagging.

In fact, an article on channel and technology trends site Channelnomics points out that 27 percent of solution providers do not have a business-operations plan in place[6].

If you have not planned out the next six months, 12 months, and further, you will rarely have a tight understanding of what your company needs to do to grow and improve. And it will be hard to communicate objectives to your team, which could hinder their productivity.

Entrepreneur and investor Patrick Hull recommends a concise, realistic, and conservative business plan that isn't loaded up with fluff, pie-in-the-sky projections, or a dishonest evaluation of the challenges and opportunities you face[7].

↘ **Our Big Tip:**

Create a plan for your entire business so that you have a better chance of continuously moving in the right direction.

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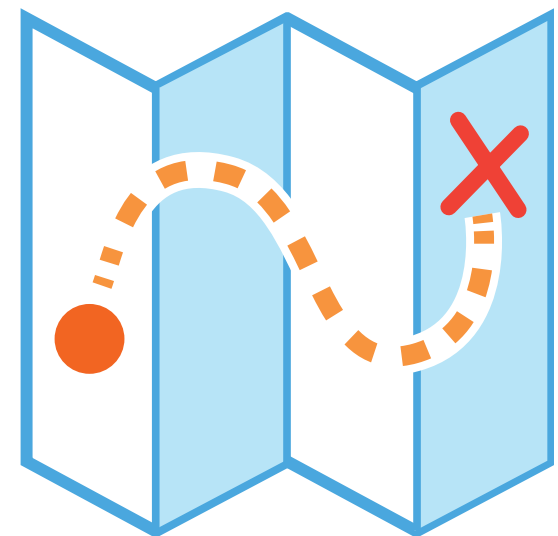
[6] "Too Many Solution Providers Guessing on Business Development," Diana L Mirakaj, Channelnomics
[7] "5 Tips for a Great Business Plan," Patrick Hull, Forbes

PLANS TO CONSIDER:

What to Include in a Business Plan:

- **Purpose**—Call it a vision statement, company mission, or whatever you want—you simply need to concisely describe what you hope to achieve.

- **Company Details**—Describe your company, identify the critical members of your team, and list your products and services.

- **Market Evaluation**—What trends are driving your business opportunity? Who are your target customers? How many exist, and how many could you sell to?

- **Sales and Marketing**—How do you plan to find customers, and what will be your methods for selling to them?

- **Competitive Analysis**—What are you up against competitively? Name your primary competitors and how your strengths and weaknesses match up.

- **Operations**—Who are your partners, what assets you do have, and how do you train your staff?

- **Financials**—What's your cash flow situation? How much capital do you have or do you need? What are your revenue targets?

SCORE, the nonprofit organization that supports small businesses, offers Business Plan Templates that you can use as a foundation for your plan. Download those templates at www.score.org.

One Big Tip for Running a Productive Business:

How well do you understand the factors that drive your business forward? To be confident that your team is focused on the vital factors that are critical to your success, define the Three Key Metrics that drive your business and improve upon them. These metrics can be the perfect guide to ensure you're always doing the right things.

— *Rick Faulk, CEO at Intronis*
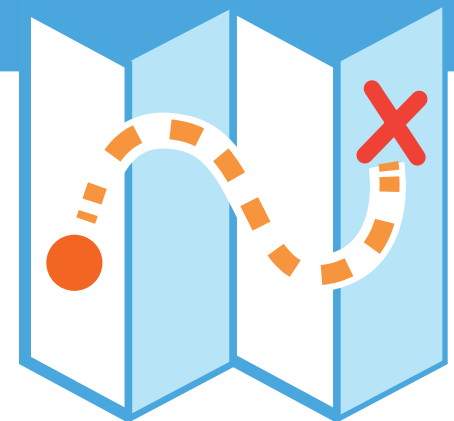
#5 FOCUS:

It's hard to capitalize on your business plan without the right level of focus and vision. You might waste time on work that is not in the best interest of the organization.

An unfocused team does things that aren't vital to the business's goals, lags on customer support and sales objectives, and fails to move the needle in ways that drive the business forward. A lack of focus is a drag on productivity you can't afford.

We recommended you first establish the vision for your company—essentially its purpose, aims, and leading goal. In addition to the one overarching vision that drives the entire business, you can also have smaller objectives that you focus on when the time is right.

The key is that, as the business leader, you need to set the priority. It's up to you to establish what your team focuses on and when.

↘ **Our Big Tip:**

Develop a leading vision for your entire business, and stay agile so that you can shift focus when new priorities pop up.

FOCUS ON:

Focus Areas to Consider:

- **Vertical**—Is the healthcare industry a particular point of strength for your support team? Then consider becoming a full-fledged healthcare IT support firm so you apply your time working with clients you are most qualified to help. You can apply this tip to any vertical.

- **Service**—Maybe there's one specific IT service that you know can drive the most revenue for your business. Or maybe you've introduced a new product and you want to hit the ground running. Focus your sales efforts on pushing these services as your core offerings and motivate them with targeted incentives.

- **Situational**—An all-hands on deck situation arises—say, for example, a client has a disaster. This is an obvious opportunity to focus your team's efforts on a singular goal. As we mentioned in Tip 3, developing process plans helps your team stay on target and productive when the unexpected arises.

- **Cyclical**—Maybe a certain time of the year offers the best sales opportunities. Or maybe you know your support calls go up during the busy hurricane, tornado, or snow season. However you look at it, timing can impact how you focus every part of your business.

One Big Tip for Driving Sales Productivity:

Build the compensation plan that drives the behavior that you want out of your sales team. For example, if you want to sell a lot of one product line, build a compensation plan that incents your sales team to sell more of that particular solution. That way, you're incentivizing business growth that you know will make a difference.

— Rob Merklinger, Vice President of Sales at Intronis

CONCLUSION:

What's the key to running a more productive IT services business? It's not any one technology or process, but rather a mix of strategies and services that help you achieve more of the things you need to do to succeed.

Not every tip we shared in this e-book will work perfectly for your business, and there are surely many other tips that we left out. But ultimately, many of the ideas shared here should help you start thinking differently about the way you approach your business each day.

The end game should be a tighter-running service operation that is better equipped to quickly respond to client concerns and deliver on the objectives you believe are most important to your business.

Remember—there are always more things that you could be doing, but that doesn't mean you have the capacity to actually tackle all those tasks. A productive IT services business is able to focus on the things that matter most and that make the biggest difference to your long-term success.

Thoughts on IT Services Productivity:

"In order to succeed as a managed service provider in today's competitive landscape you can't be afraid to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. Never be afraid of the hard work. That is the difference between success and failure."

— *Stuart Crawford, CEO and Chairman, Ulistic*

→ Learn more, access additional resources at **intronis.com/beproductive**

About Intronis

Intronis provides world-class data protection solutions for Small Businesses, delivered exclusively through the IT channel. The Intronis ECHOplatform securely protects physical and virtual data with native support for physical imaging, VMware, Hyper-V, Exchange, and SQL, all through a re-brandable central management console that integrates with major RMM and PSA tools. Offered with unlimited and fixed-fee storage pricing per SMB account, IT service providers are able to rapidly grow revenue and scale profit. Through Intronis ECHOshare, channel partners can easily expand their IT services portfolio to include tightly integrated business-grade file sync and share. Learn more at www.intronis.com.

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