



Professional Services Industry Solutions from Microsoft

A White Paper for Leaders
of Professional Services
Organizations

Microsoft Dynamics

Executive Summary

This paper offers an in-depth Microsoft point-of-view on the specific business and technology needs of professional services firms today. Microsoft plays a key role in addressing these needs through a range of solutions purposely designed with the concerns of professional services organizations in mind.

Professional services organizations are highly diverse in the range of services that they deliver, but all share an intense focus on cultivating trusted advisor relationships and fostering long-term repeat business with profitable clients. To meet this objective and deliver steady fee growth, practice directors must invest in the right thought leadership—timely and distinctive expertise that attracts new clients and sets the firm apart in the marketplace.

That means recruiting and developing the right talent—a challenge compounded by the fact that the best and brightest professionals may leave for a competitor or for industry the moment that firm growth falters or professional development opportunities wane.

Operationally, professional services organizations and their practice leaders have to walk a tightrope to balance assigning the right people to the right client service engagements with making sure that the firm delivers predictable services and profitable results.

Even with the right portfolio of clients and outstanding talent, financial success isn't always guaranteed. Leadership must also set and communicate targets, report on progress, and drive continuous improvement in leading and lagging indicators of performance.

But these are just table stakes challenges—common denominator demands of being in the business. To pursue next-level performance, firms also need to anticipate and address the needs of clients that are expanding into markets and geographies not already served by the firm. And with aging generations of professionals in established economies and rapidly growing pools of educated and deeply digital next-generation workers in developing economies, firms need to recalibrate expectations about who will deliver services, and when and how the work will be done.

To effectively meet these business challenges head-on, professional services organizations need to take a coordinated approach to change. This in turn requires increasingly integrated solutions that bring together all of their specialized talent across client service and practice support roles.

The Microsoft Dynamics line of products offers a modern and flexible suite of business solutions that are built to work together seamlessly to support and link key levers of the business, enhancing both individual performance and firm-wide operations. Our solutions give firms a holistic business management approach that ties together client relationships, global resources, consistent service delivery, and predictable financial results.

By taking advantage of these solutions, professional services firms can deliver timely and distinctive client service, manage professional and intellectual capital, grow wallet and market share, and embed quality, efficiency, and risk management into business processes.



Professional Services: Uniquely People-Driven

Professional services firms are uniquely people-driven organizations. They depend on the knowledge and skills of their employees to sell and deliver a range of advisory and specialty services, develop and service complex systems and structures, or create engaging content for consumer and commercial audiences generally working on a project or contract basis.

This richly diverse segment of the Services sector, spans information technology (IT) services, management consulting, accounting, architecture and engineering, marketing and advertising, and other professions engaged in research and development, business optimization, and training.

And while these organizations deliver a wide range of services, they're all intensely focused on cultivating trusted advisor relationships. This is one of the areas in which individual employees demonstrate their importance to the firm. For it is only through professionals—passionate about solving problems for clients and highly skilled in their discipline—that firms can secure lasting client relationships.

With the right balance of client-focus and people-focus, firms can nurture long-term business partnerships that will generate profitable revenue. The collective calling card of these firms is and must be perfect execution for on-time, on-budget delivery. All of which makes *seamless communication and coordination between professionals* a top-of-mind concern for firm leaders—it's the foundation on which successful project execution, client satisfaction, and financial results rest.

Four Persistent Priorities: Laying a Foundation

Beyond their people-driven identity, professional services firms also share a common set of persistent business priorities:



Client Relationships: Firm leaders are concerned with better understanding their client portfolio, the hallmarks of a lasting and profitable relationship, and what they can do to expand the profitable segments of their portfolio most efficiently. To grow revenue, these leaders must be able to effectively mine client data in order to identify opportunities and coordinate a consistent, firm-wide approach to prioritization and pursuit.

Saleable Expertise: Of course, maintaining client relationships, delivering on commitments, and building the firm's brand all depend on assigning the right people to work with each client. And, professional services firms live or die by their ability to attract, hire, retain, and motivate exceptional employees and indeed freelancers and subcontractors as well.

Service Delivery: The service delivery lifecycle is where the rubber meets the road and where firms most need industry-specific capabilities. Being able to impose methodology controls on the planning and execution of projects is so critical to the predictable, repeatable, and ultimately profitable delivery of an engagement. This is why practice leaders and chief operating officers at IT services, management consulting, and accounting firms in particular invest so much time and effort in driving the definition of archetypical projects with phased structures, milestones, and deliverables.

Financial Results: If a professional services firm is effectively managing the preceding business priorities, financial results should theoretically take care of themselves. However, controllers and CFOs will be quick to point out the practical reality that cost controls, oversight, and direction-setting don't happen on their own. Service line and practice managers with P&L responsibility are similarly concerned with looking at their books of business from many different angles, identifying concerns before they become problems, and taking early corrective action.

This combined set of challenges—effectively mining data, finding the right people, properly planning and executing projects, and managing the business holistically— is persistent within the professional services segment. And these foundational needs must be addressed in any market situation.

Four Transformational Trends: Raising the Bar

In addition to managing persistent business needs, professional services organizations face four major transformational trends/demands that will shape their competitive survival and success:



Client Expansion. Today, even small clients are increasingly multimarket, multiregional, and global because of offshoring, extended supply chains, and free trade opportunities. Not far behind, professional services organizations of all sizes are expanding their operations into neighboring states and across oceans, most often to follow and thereby maintain their relevance with key clients. When a client opens a new manufacturing center, warehouse, store, or office, whether in a nearby city or another part of the world, firm leaders need to know if the client is profitable or strategic to the business and a bellwether indicator of things to come. They need deep contextual insight to decide whether to follow the client into the new market and how.

This is fueling the adoption of practice development tools that provide a 360-degree view into clients and portfolio segmentation. These tools also enable consistent pursuit and engagement practices that ensure a familiar service experience wherever the client does business and seeks professional advice and operational support.

Changing Workforce. While some practice leaders wrestle with globalization, others are concerned with macro trends on the supply side, where a changing workforce adds to complexity in the growth equation. Difficult economic conditions notwithstanding, the mass retirement of a generation of skilled professionals is under way in established economies. In many markets there is or will soon be a shortage of local and sufficiently mature successors. Meanwhile, we see rapid growth in highly educated and deeply digital, next-generation workers in emerging economic hot spots that offer new growth opportunities. These tectonic shifts in the market for talent are fundamentally altering expectations about who will deliver services, where they will do the work, and how the work will be done—giving rise to both challenges and opportunities in intergenerational collaboration, cultural diversity and inclusion, and approaches to service innovation.

The combination of demand-side client globalization and supply-side workforce demographics is pushing practice managers and HR directors to find ways to maintain central profiles of people and subcontractors that can be shared across subsidiaries and locations to make it simpler to identify human capital assets that may be leveraged to deliver services.



Collaborative Execution. At a more detailed project level, technology-driven improvements in access to information are enabling fluid project teams that cross firm, client, and contractor boundaries, creating expectations of high transparency and provider responsiveness. More and more, firms need to deliver services using a combination of both service provider and client-side resources. Taken together, the compound challenges of globalization, a changing workforce, and heightened transparency are driving adoption of systems that support virtual teams that span geographic distances to offer talent wherever it's needed. The systems also give firms the ability to maintain common processes and tools that can simultaneously support many local languages and currencies. In other words, true cross-border collaboration.

Agile Adaptation. For professional services firms doing business today, there is a new normal: expanding into new arenas in response to increasingly demanding clients. This means employing an increasingly diverse talent pool scattered across multiple regulatory jurisdictions, and deploying the right talent in a targeted manner across client engagements in multiple markets. That operational complexity drives downside risk that can arise from failure to maintain alignment and consistency in project controls, administrative procedures, and regulatory compliance requirements. And that operational complexity also elevates the risk of missed opportunities—opportunities that the firm could not respond to because of organizational inertia and inflexibility to change.

At both the administrative and operational levels, firms therefore need systems, processes, and in-house expertise that can respond in a fluid manner to changing business needs. For example, they might need to quickly establish an integrated business presence in a new geography via acquisition or accelerated, organic expansion.

As firms deal with transformational trends, they are wrestling with this question: how can they identify problems early and act quickly, delivering operational visibility and decision-making authority to front-line managers while implementing policies and controls that can rapidly evolve with market demand and changes in the available talent pool?

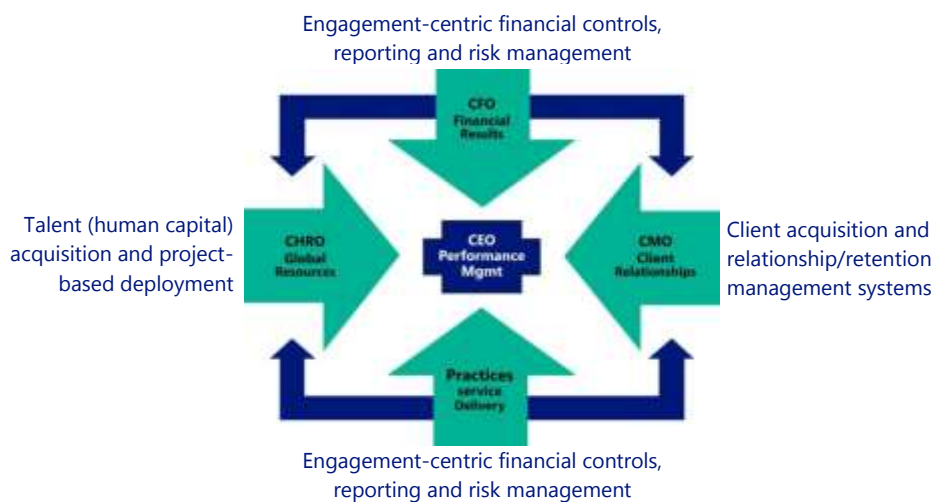
The Need for Coordinated Action

In conversations with many Microsoft customers in the industry, we find that the needs and trends outlined above are of broad and shared concern to firm leadership. We also see natural, role-specific focus areas and priorities take shape. Marketing executives are sensitive to changing client expectations and coordination with practice leaders to maximize service line and firm relevance. Human resource leaders strive to meet capability and capacity requirements in the face of changing practice group and service line requirements. Practice leaders balance the demand to be responsive to each client's unique service requirements against the imperative to drive operational consistency and resulting quality, efficiency, and risk mitigation. And financial executives emphasize cost-efficient firm administration and policy compliance while trying to maintain flexibility to changing practice group needs.

Across the board, however, responses to these strategic business concerns continue to be constrained by tactical execution and coordination challenges. Practice group and functional leaders alike convey that they have difficulty simply obtaining insight into and adjusting their own books of business or portfolios of business processes over time—all the more so as their firms have grown into complementary practice groups operating in loose alignment across multiple offices.

Despite agreement on key challenges and opportunities facing the firm, planning and implementing proactive change proves extraordinarily difficult. Leaders understand full well that changes in personnel and culture remain the hardest long-term challenges, but the moment they embark on change they are often stymied by entrenched business practices built on stand-alone and often brittle business systems. So the tail wags the dog—not because business priorities are out of alignment, but because existing processes and systems were designed and implemented by specific budget holders at different points in time and with varying objectives.

Indeed, we see corroboration in works from industry thought leaders like [Kennedy Consulting Research & Advisory](#). For example, in a recent white paper on the challenge of driving firm growth and profitability, Kennedy outlines dependencies between key leadership roles, noting that practice managers depend on human resource directors to deliver the right candidates with the right skillset to meet practice group growth expectations.



Source: Driving Growth and Profitability: Why Growth Oriented Professional Service Organizations Require Integrated Client-Relationship, Resource, and Financial Management Solutions. Kennedy Consulting Research & Advisory, 2011

These expectations, in turn, are based on marketing plans agreed on with the firm's chief marketing officer and supported by investments that are approved and monitored by the chief financial officer. And to accomplish their common goal of efficient and profitable growth, practice and HR leaders need to share expertise and knowledge across the entire organization to make the most of available talent and domain-specific content. All of which raises the need for coordinated action and supporting integrated systems that can streamline communication and the transfer of information among interdependent client service and practice support organizations.

The Struggle to Achieve Business Process Maturity

To address persistent foundational needs and drive improvements in business performance, every leader in the firm needs to have relevant and clear insight into the current state of the business and the flexibility to adjust business processes in coordination and collaboration with their peers. Moreover, to take a proactive approach to transformational trends, leaders also need the ability to develop and test new analytics and insights that cut across focus areas to connect changes in client demand patterns with competency and capacity shortfalls as well as gaps in service delivery performance. With foresight as well as integrated and flexible systems, firm leadership can optimize people and processes, streamline operations, and fulfill profitable growth objectives.

But the pathway to that point is far from simple. Expert analysts, such as Kennedy and [SPI Research](#), observe that many professional services organizations have been slow to implement effective tools to manage client relationships and invest in their best and most profitable clients. In some cases, that is because the 20-year client relationships of senior partners in the firm trump the profitability measure of a given account. But more often it's because client contact systems are antiquated, ad hoc, or stand-alone, and they don't link with project accounting systems to deliver the insights needed to make differential investment decisions.

From a financial results perspective, firms also need business solutions that provide core administrative capabilities like general ledger, accounts payable/receivable, and HR, as well as operational or industry-specific capabilities. The latter would include, for example, time-and-materials, fixed-fee, and hybrid project design; work-in-progress, utilization, and realization reporting; complex milestone and progress-based invoicing mechanisms with client service manager override as well as specification of deferred billing and write-off arrangements; and the ability to handle advance billing with independent revenue recognition for improved revenue days and cash flow management.

Unfortunately, many firms today still use discrete business applications for common business functions, laboriously maintaining and integrating stand-alone applications for customer relationship management (CRM), project management, time and expense, billing, human resources, and financial management. These silo-systems and applications—often owned and funded by different teams within the organization—typically develop overlapping functionality as owners try to bridge gaps by extending their own tool rather than incur the overhead of learning and adopting a different system to address an incremental need. As a result, many organizations have difficulty obtaining “apples-to-apples” comparisons of data between business groups and insight into related data across business and functional groups.

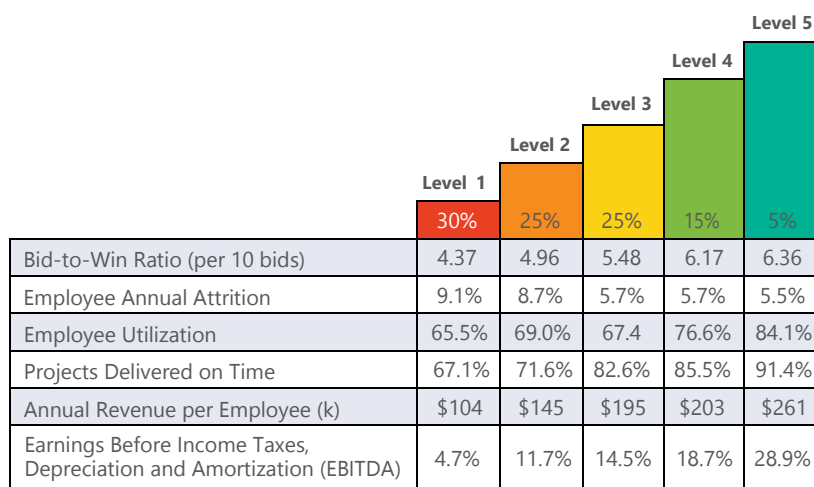
This reflects the reality that most professional services firms are not at an effective level of maturity in terms of business processes. SPI Research, for instance, uses five *Professional Services Maturity™ Model* benchmark levels when describing today’s professional services firms. The majority of firms (30 percent) are only at Maturity Level 1 (“Initiated”), in which processes are ad hoc and fluid, with the focus primarily on new client acquisition and reference building. For these organizations, success is dependent on the competence and heroics of people— not on the use of proven tools and processes.

Twenty-five percent of firms are considered to be at Maturity Level 2 (“Piloted”), during which processes have started to become repeatable, but operational excellence and best practices can only be discerned within functions and not across functions. Another 25 percent of firms are at Maturity Level 3 (“Deployed”), where they’ve created a set of standard processes and operating principles for all major service performance pillars. By this level, project delivery methodologies and quality measurements are in place and enforced companywide.

At Maturity Level 4 (“Institutionalized”), reached by only 15 percent of firms, management uses precise measurements, metrics, and controls. Organizations at this level set goals for customer acquisition, retention, and penetration, in addition to a complete set of financial and quality operating controls and measurements. Maturity Level 5 (“Optimized”) is only attained by 5 percent of professional services organizations. At this level, executives are focused on continually improving elements in the performance pillars, and a disciplined and controlled process is in place to measure and optimize performance through innovative technological improvements.

As the SPI Research table shows, a firm’s process maturity level and the implicit degree of coordination within the organization can have a very real implication for overall business performance. Improvements in process and tool integration to achieve maturity are not lightly undertaken, so it makes sense for organizations to carefully assess where they stand, what performance gains they hope to achieve, and to what end—whether for investors, partners, staff, and/or clients.

“Maturity is determined through alignment and focus both within and across functions.”



At Level 4 the organization has implemented structured business processes and utilizes integrated information systems to assure there is “one view of the business.”

Source: The 2012 Professional Services Maturity™ Model from SPI Research



Pathway to Success: An Integrated, Holistic Approach

Assuming that firm leadership wish to “level-up” to a higher process maturity and business performance threshold, how would they do so? According to Kennedy, one effective pathway is to implement an integrated performance management solution that ties together all key business focus areas and roles within the organization.

By taking advantage of integrated business solutions that work across multiple business focus areas and individual roles, professional services organizations can get a 360-degree view into project and cost controls. Such a system can also offer better expense management and can provide practice managers and CFOs with up-to-date, detailed operational insights that can lead to better, more-informed decision making and impact.

Indeed, the SPI *Professional Services Maturity Model* shows specific results achieved by professional services organizations with solutions that integrate customer relationship management (CRM) and financial processes, human capital management (HCM) and financial processes, and professional services automation (PSA) and financial processes. Of course, the systems themselves are only part of a broader firm-wide commitment to behavioral change that fosters tighter communication and coordination—the systems require the right firm environment and vice versa.

The result of intentional commitment to process maturity and implementation of integrated systems is a holistic view of clients and of work conducted, past and present. With this view, professional services firm leaders can chart future engagements for both current and prospective clients with a higher degree of confidence than before, and they can forecast delivery capacity requirements and costs, bringing greater predictability to business results.

While strongly agreeing with this view, Microsoft adds another facet to the proposition: solutions that focus more directly on the user experience to engage people more profoundly and productively in the work they do.

Microsoft Proposition: Free Individuals to Drive Results

It has long been Microsoft’s mission to help individuals—and organizations—realize their full potential, so we are deeply committed to helping professionals and staff perform at their best and achieve greater job satisfaction through improved ability to collaborate with colleagues and productively serve clients. For this reason, we emphasize easy-to-use tools designed to work the way people work. Our tools are built to work together seamlessly, supporting and linking key levers of the business and enhancing both individual performance and firm-wide operations.

Capitalize on talent and catalyze innovation

Today, our professional services industry solutions can help firms capitalize on all available talent by enabling assignments and balanced utilization across time zones and business units. For example, we give human resource directors the ability to maintain central profiles of employees and subcontractors that can be shared across subsidiaries and locations to make it easier to identify human capital assets that may be tapped to deliver services. With powerful competency and availability-based search capabilities, practice managers and schedulers can rapidly find and assign the right person for the right job at the right time and place. And at an even deeper level, resources can be hard-booked or soft-booked to client engagements or project proposals-in-process to manage the human capital supply chain that is at the heart of professional services operations.

Cultivate distinctive client experiences

We support increasingly virtual and diverse project teams with rich planning and collaboration environments that help reduce administrative overhead and focus the team on the client problem at hand, catalyzing creativity and innovation. And we help firms harness these capabilities to cultivate unique client experiences and evolve repeatable yet highly distinctive and client-responsive service experiences across distributed teams. So practice managers can focus on client relationships while easily delivering project estimates based on vetted and adjusted templates for common project requests. Project managers, in turn, can focus on team dynamics while taking advantage of work-breakdown structure templates for project planning, sophisticated budgeting and cost controls, time and expense entry and approval workflows, and project analytics. And consultants can spend less time onboarding with new projects and more time getting to know each client and executing on assignments.

Compress time to insight and action

We then embed increasingly industry-specific information and performance measures into our solutions to help compress time to insight and action. By putting richly contextual and role-specific information at their fingertips, we help individuals ranging from junior consultants to practice managers and from project accountants to compensation and benefits managers work smarter, streamlining and accelerating project execution and firm operations. Financial leaders in particular can build on integrated project management and accounting, sales and marketing, and human capital management functionality to obtain a complete and holistic view of their business. They can streamline reporting and improve accountability across the organization while ensuring compliance with firm policy through consistent business processes and policies across all locations.

As important, Microsoft constantly strives to deliver reduced total cost of ownership for organizations that adopt our solutions. To this end, our solutions build on the business processes and technology investments that many firms already have in place—the everyday business practices and associated productivity tools like Microsoft Excel, Outlook, SharePoint, and Windows that users are already familiar with. This reduces the time needed for training and change management through easy and intuitive user experiences that foster productivity, firm-wide adoption, and a faster return on investment.

The result is a portfolio of integrated-by-design solutions that equip and indeed free individuals to do their best work within an increasingly connected organization and wider ecosystem. With this kind of a holistic approach to business solutions, we believe that Microsoft can help professional services firms elevate both individual and organizational performance to strive for and achieve the goal of becoming a “Level 5” enterprise.

Microsoft Business Solutions for Service Professionals

To execute on our vision, we presently focus on five solution areas or logical sets of business capabilities that are core to how professional services firms build process maturity and enable the execution of business strategy.



Practice Development

- **Objective:** Close more deals faster and grow client wallet share with insightful, timely, and contextual responses that build trust and annuity business.
- **Capabilities:** Client/project management; lead/opportunity management; proposal management; brand assets and template management; marketing automation; and analytics and KPIs.



Service Delivery

- **Objective:** Deliver as promised and turn clients into enthusiastic referrals through optimized service planning, engagement, and execution.
- **Capabilities:** Project quotation, management and planning, and budgeting and cost control; time and expense reporting; complex invoicing and billing; service orders and contracts; service calls and dispatching; repair management; service subscriptions; and analytics and KPIs.



Knowledge Management

- **Objective:** Stop reinventing the wheel and take full advantage of your firm's intellectual capital with proven tools to capture, find, share, and reuse information.
- **Capabilities:** RFI/RFP management; enterprise-wide content management and search; internal/external social computing; team workspaces; and process libraries and visualizations.



Firm Administration

- **Objective:** Know how your complex business is performing with "anytime anywhere" access to essential metrics and role-specific business processes.
- **Capabilities:** Management dashboards; firm and practice reporting; compliance and internal controls; revenue and cost accounting; budgeting and forecasting; procurement and sourcing; vendor management; tax management; payroll; and treasury and banking.



Professional Development

- **Objective:** Attract, develop, and retain the best and brightest talent by providing expertise-building experiences that optimize career and utilization objectives.
- **Capabilities:** Recruiting and onboarding; competency assessment and tracking; skill and availability- driven project assignment; performance management; and compensation and incentive management.

At the heart of each of these solutions are a set of direct-from-Microsoft offerings that include Microsoft Dynamics products with capabilities purpose-built for the industry. We also extend these foundational products with specialized and complementary features from industry partners to address the unique needs of specific disciplines within the professional services community.

How Professional Services Organizations Use Integrated Solutions from Microsoft

Many professional services organizations are using integrated business solutions from Microsoft to further strategic business objectives through improved process maturity that drives practical and impactful performance results. For a cross-section of customer stories, please consider the following summary examples, each with embedded hyperlinks to full case studies (click on the company logos):

Practice Development	Knowledge Management	Practice Development	Service Delivery
 <p>Saving 6.6% of annual service personnel hours via service management and customer portal solution</p>	 <p>Cut time on consulting sales proposals and deliverables by 15-20% with social networking and document co-authoring solution</p>	 <p>Reduced employee travel and communication costs by about £700,000 using cross-unit communication and collaboration solution</p>	 <p>Creating budgets for new projects in just one-tenth of the time it took previously</p>  <p>Increasing the firm's internal knowledge index by 10% each quarter while reducing operational and IT costs</p>
Firm Administration			
 <p>Cutting billing cycle in half and reducing ERP support by 60% via end-to-end project accounting and financial management solution</p>		 <p>Providing faster, seamless invoicing with fewer errors and the ability to close the books within a few days with an end-to-end solution</p>	

Offering Firms the Power of Choice

Business solutions from Microsoft are designed to give professional services organizations the power of choice, through a flexible adoption model. Firms have the opportunity to acquire and implement different solution elements as their own specific business needs and timetables require. For example, a firm could start by deploying solutions for Service Delivery (including project management and accounting) and Firm Administration (including core financials), or by deploying more common-denominator components such as expense management or employee profile, competency, and performance management.

Microsoft also offers organizations a choice in technology. Professional services firms can choose to deploy a solution on-premises, in the cloud, or as a hybrid of both, depending on needs and budgets. And IT leaders can often accomplish similar business outcomes using different combinations of software, selectively building on an existing installed base of Microsoft products to reduce the incremental cost of new solutions.

Conclusion

Professional services industry solutions from Microsoft have evolved over many years, with a number of key elements falling into place recently to create what we submit is the strongest and most integrated enterprise solution offering in the market today. The strength of this solution portfolio, combined with our commitment to professional services organizations, is its unmatched value in the market. As evidence of our commitment, we offer the following:

- **Research and Development:** Microsoft invests more than \$9 billion annually in research and development across the business, making it one of the largest firms on the planet in terms of a financial commitment to R&D. The Microsoft Dynamics business unit that delivers industry-specific solutions is both a key area of investment in its own right and a huge beneficiary of the rich product and innovation pipeline that it draws upon.
- **Dedicated R&D Industry Team:** Our Microsoft Dynamics unit has a dedicated team charged with building out the roadmap and industry-specific functionality for professional services organizations. Furthermore, there are dedicated resources charged with looking 5 to 10 years into the future to identify major market trends that will affect this industry and to assess how we can help customers prepare to address them.
- **Industry-Dedicated Partners and Partner Management Team:** A number of partners have built their business around delivering Microsoft industry solutions to professional services firms, and they are vitally important collaborators in Microsoft's industry strategy. We ensure ongoing alignment between these partners and Microsoft R&D through a team of dedicated partner management professionals.
- **Industry-Specific and Microsoft Certified Partner Solutions:** We often work with partners to build targeted software features that extend our code base for niche uses while eliminating the need for costly integration services. For example, we take advantage of partner code to deliver equipment rental solutions. To ensure that these solutions are of the highest quality, we require partners to certify their offerings through the Certified for Microsoft Dynamics program, which includes code reviews and sets precise standards.
- **Dedicated Industry Marketing and Business Development Teams:** We continue to invest in industry-aligned marketing programs and resources to engage more closely with customers, trade associations, and thought leaders and to improve the industry-specificity and relevance of our offerings over time.

Microsoft Solutions for the Dynamic Professional Services firm

Microsoft Dynamics is a line of integrated, adaptable business management solutions that enables you and your people to make business decisions with greater confidence. Microsoft Dynamics works like and with familiar Microsoft software, automating and streamlining financial, customer relationship, and supply chain processes in a way that helps you drive business success.

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