

A man in a dark suit and glasses is looking at a laptop screen. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand resting on his chin. In the background, another man in a light blue shirt and glasses is also working at a laptop. The office has large windows with blinds, and the lighting is warm and professional.

AMF

Application Maintenance Framework

WHY INVEST IN SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE?

Companies and the markets that they operate in - plus the technologies that both rely on - are all fast-paced, moving targets. As a result it is critical for any organisation in today's world to ensure that their business applications also have the ability to continuously adapt.

With a chosen, standardised technology platform like Microsoft Dynamics, the emphasis on technical development becomes even more important. Microsoft is reinvesting a large portion of the licensing costs paid by customers into developing new and improved standard functionalities, which they are continuously released to users. If your organisation and live application cannot absorb these enhancements and improvements as they happen, you may lose out on cost-saving and revenue-boosting opportunities - and eventually risk being behind your competition. Likewise, if your business changes but your Microsoft Dynamics solution doesn't adapt to it, its value to the business will steadily decrease.

PUTTING IT INTO PERSPECTIVE

When talking about IT investments in general, there is a tendency to focus on optimising the development phase, for example by comparing waterfall project management methods to more agile approaches. However when looking at the full lifecycle of your Microsoft Dynamics Solution, the optimisations you can make during the development phase (perhaps over six months) seem insignificant compared to the benefits you could realise over the 10 years of operations that follow.

LONGER LIFE

By having a strong post-go-live organisation, with the ability to develop the solution alongside the running of your business, you can ensure full alignment between daily operations and your Microsoft Dynamics solution. You can update it regularly and therefore benefit from enhancements, changes, updates

and bugfixes. This approach will prolong the lifespan of your Microsoft Dynamics solution and help you to avoid or limit significant upgrade projects in the future.

BETTER SCOPE MANAGEMENT

It is a common belief that most technology solutions, regardless of the platform or provider, are flooded with features which are either never used or where the potential value does not match the cost of implementation. By having a capable maintenance setup, you can reduce the scope of the development project to include only the must-haves and let the end user community co-decide on the nice-to-haves, based on their actual needs and usage. This will keep your initial investment low, the delay before you can reap the benefits shorter and provide much greater flexibility in re-prioritising your efforts on an ongoing basis.



ACCELERATE USER-ADOPTION

Return-on-investment (ROI) of IT infrastructure is driven by an expectation that end-users are working with the provided solution correctly. As a result, user adoption rates significantly affect how accurate the initial business case was. For example, if you forecasted that Microsoft Dynamics CRM would boost your lead-to-opportunity conversion rate by 20%, or if you invested in Microsoft Dynamics AX for the elaborate reporting facilities, the financial impact of either examples being realised six months later than expected – due solely to a slower than anticipated user-adoption – will be negative.

One alternative scenario we recommend is to offer the end-users an attentive and capable support service alongside the solution. This service would be delivered by a team ready to promptly and comprehensively handle all queries or issues experienced by users, as well as help them to take on board any improvements made to the solution. The task of educating your users about the solution and its capabilities is an ongoing one.

RELIABILITY

Reliability stems from creating a degree of trust between the user and their belief in the solution. Depending on the criticality of your Dynamics solution, the impact of any issues and unexpected events arising from it will vary. Having an attentive service desk team that is ready to respond to all queries will increase the overall reliability level.

Additionally, being able to foresee and correct potential issues before they pose real impact on your business can have just as big an impact on reliability as any reactive measures you could take. Proactive reliability involves performing scheduled tasks before the business needs to rely on their output. For example, a retailer would perform test-purchases on all POS every morning before their stores open, or a finance team would run a test invoice task a few days before the actual monthly invoicing process begins.

MICROSOFT UPDATES

Microsoft's strategy is to heavily invest in and apply innovative developments to their solutions on a continual basis. It sees this strategy as the main differentiator between them and their competitors in the CRM and ERP market and as a result, its roadmap involves four substantial releases for both Dynamics CRM and Dynamics AX every year.

This approach can bring significant opportunities for your business to increase the value of the Dynamics solution, but it also poses a threat. You must have an IT team that is knowledgeable about your business, your solution and be able to evaluate the features which could benefit and which would just create distracting 'noise'. Two possible examples of this would be to, firstly, carry out a qualitative and individual assessment of usage, filtering the updates from Microsoft, and secondly, to remove existing customisations and work to the standard Dynamics options.



FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN A SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE SETUP

1. SERVICES

When you are in operation mode, the following tasks would generally be performed:

- Helping the end-users overcome unexpected obstacles, so they can finish their task(s);
- Execute and oversee regular tasks, for example imports/exports, monitoring or user administration; and,
- Add or change the functionality of the Dynamics solution to either fix a bug, align with new business requirements or apply a Microsoft upgrade.

2. LAYERED STRUCTURE

It is common to structure a support organisation into layers, commonly described as levels or lines, for example first, second and third line Support. The idea is that to provide service-oriented and varied support in the first line – and then enable the team to escalate to the next line, which will be more specialised and so on.

The decision about where to place your Dynamics support in this structure is an important one, because those support individuals will need to demonstrate the skills of both business-aware super users and developers. If you intend to outsource your Dynamics support, you should also consider having a level in-house as well. Microsoft Dynamics is so closely linked to your business and its performance, that anchoring and protecting the knowledge of your own Dynamics solution in-house, is critical for basic business risk management and for vendor flexibility.

3. A FIXED YET SCALABLE TEAM

Maintaining a Microsoft Dynamics application requires a varied skillset. Teams with that responsibility must possess knowledge of your specific business, the best practice in your industry, understand the possibilities with the standard functionality of the current version, the feature roadmap from Microsoft, the design and customisations available and a wide array of technical skills and programming languages. It's an extensive knowledge list.

Relying on a single individual will limit both the range and availability of competences. That person cannot be an expert in all the above areas, could be sick, on holiday or move on from your company. Equally, relying on a team, for example in a large call-centre, will limit the depth of the competences about your implementation.

The key is to find a balance where some people are dedicated and attentive, and maintain the ability to quickly scale support to respond to a fluctuating workload, as a result optimising both delivery and costs.



4. COLLABORATION AND MANAGEMENT

An effective Support & Maintenance set-up requires close operational collaboration and free-flowing, honest communication between all the stakeholders, including business owners, end-users and the IT function. The communication processes will also be important, as each stakeholder group will have different priorities and ways of working. A carefully tailored communication plan is essential to ensure that the right people are talking at the right time about the right things.

5. PROCESS MATURITY AND GOVERNANCE

A common pitfall when putting Support and Maintenance capabilities in place is to prioritise the business of ticket handling, where each ticket is handled individually and as soon as possible. The result delivers strong performance measures for response and resolution times, but if these measurements are not connected to the total value of the solution, the operation will lack focus and not provide overall benefits to the business. There are plenty of options to introduce quality and strategic alignment into everyday decision-making, and that is what Process Maturity is helpful for. It's the ability for a Support and Maintenance team to function alongside a solution, focusing on a combination of delivering the high-level solution strategy in place, meeting the overall business drivers that drove initial adoption of the solution and solving individual tasks.

6. ORGANISATION AND OWNERSHIP

It's likely that most IT services involve complexities with stakeholders, where perhaps not all individuals are fully assigned to responsibilities and may not work in the same location or even sit next to each other. As a result it's sensible to define and align everyone as to expected ownership and responsibilities, as well as who verifies whether they are fulfilled. Adhering to the RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) matrix could help assist with this.

ALFAPEOPLE AMF

When we discuss all the topics in this whitepaper with potential customers, we often find that despite their best efforts, they do not have the competences, capacity or readiness to deliver the post-go-live Support and Maintenance structure internally. AlfaPeople has a comprehensive Application Maintenance Service tailored for our Microsoft Dynamics customers, called the AlfaPeople AMF (Application Maintenance Framework).

AlfaPeople AMF was initially launched as a local service in Denmark in early 2014. Today, it is a shared offering between AlfaPeople's European offices in Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. It is both a strategically and financially important, independent business unit within AlfaPeople.

Our AMF service provides answers to any customer query within hours and allows for reoccurring monitoring or administrative tasks to be outsourced. The functionality of the solution is regularly updated with a variety of bugfixes and enhancements, with the technical integrity of the solution always top priority, ensuring that clients never lose out or lag behind the competition.

Our AMF service can be integrated seamlessly in the customers' existing IT architecture, enhance existing support and maintenance capabilities. Working with AlfaPeople as a trusted partner and taking advantage of its 'centre of excellence' capabilities is a significant advantage for any potential client. Our support and maintenance services can be applied as either a CAPEX and OPEX cost, supporting the continuous growth of our customers' businesses at a compelling low price.

HAVE A QUESTION?

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