The Case for IT Asset Management in a Time of Crisis

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No one can predict the future and when a crisis may strike. Effective IT asset management tools and processes can help you manage and mitigate impacts and ensure business continuity.

Key Messages

- Implementing an IT Asset Management (ITAM) program has never been more important in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

- At a moment's notice, COVID-19 plunged organizations and IT into asset mobilization mode to support remote work environments.

- Remote work is here to stay as employers and employees find it to be an efficient and flexible way to work.

- An ITAM program lets organizations effectively meet the challenge of remote work environments, including issues of security, risk, disposal, inventory, repair and logistics.

- An ITAM program provides organizations and IT with greater oversight into hardware and software assets, such as what assets are being used, who is using them and how, the available inventory, and the costs associated with their use.

- If a crisis should arise, a solid ITAM program helps organizations be more resilient and meet the challenge because it:

  - Helps to address needs to quickly get back up and running.

  - Helps you understand what assets people need to do their job.

  - Helps you to effectively manage suppliers and contracts.

  - Helps you to manage risk more effectively.

  - Helps you be more proactive about asset optimization.

- COVID-19 was a global crisis that not only forced a new way of working but spurred a discussion about how business can change how they work in the future.

- Remote work brings challenges, but an effective ITAM program lets you meet these challenges while also mitigating the effects of future crises, preparing organizations to meet those challenges with confidence and control.

Introduction

It's been a year of dark clouds as COVID-19 continues to make its impact felt around the world. If you're in IT, you may be reading this from home. Many cities remain partially shut down. Many offices are still closed and workers who can work from home are still required to do so. If your organization had already digitally transformed when COVID-19 hit, you were likely able to make the transition to remote work with relative ease. But most organizations weren't so lucky. They were forced into a digital transformation[1] in an unbelievably short period of time. For many, COVID-19 exposed issues in their processes and practices, which they now see as critical areas to improve.

"As COVID-19 impacts every aspect of our work and life, we have seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months,"[2]

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft

Implementing an IT Asset Management (ITAM) program has never been more important in light of the COVID-19 impact. But it's not the only crisis that an effective ITAM program can help mitigate the impact of, which is why I'd like to make the case for ITAM in a time of crisis. In this white paper, I'll delve into the current COVID-19 crisis and the impact on IT and organizations, then discuss how ITAM can help your organization be prepared to act with confidence and control in a crisis.

1   https://www.microsoft.com/en-ca/industry/digital-transformation
2   https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-ceos-see-todays-coronavirus-world-1587720600

COVID-19 Plunged IT into a Remote Work Crisis

When COVID-19 first struck, overnight millions could not work until they had the assets, access and connectivity that they required. Some organizations were able to face it with a certain amount of ease. For example, many of our customers had already undertaken a digital transformation and instituted many cloud-based technologies, helping them make that leap to remote work more easily. But other companies did not fare so well, especially if they didn't have an ITAM program in place. In some cases, with less than 24 hours' notice, there was a requirement for IT to manage a massive shift in work locations and all that accompanies that shift.

For organizations where remote work was indeed possible, employees were left to rely on corporate resources as well as their personal infrastructure (internet supplier, PCs, monitors, mobile phones, etc.) to get the job done at home. If they had no need for online collaborative tools like Microsoft Teams previously, suddenly they had to roll out and manage these tools, while also making sure employees could use them. If on-premise solutions were in place, access to IT systems and internal resources suddenly required VPN access, the need outweighing the number of licenses already in inventory. And if an organization didn't have a properly functioning ITAM program, the crisis was made much worse. IT was left scrambling, not knowing what assets they had, what was assigned or licensed to whom, or what the current location of an asset was. For many organizations, COVID-19 shined a spotlight on their need to connect people to systems, and ensure employees have the right tools, while also ensuring that an organization understands and protects themselves when both corporate and personal assets are required or used in a location not under IT governance.

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The World Is Modernizing; Remote Work is Here to Stay

Before COVID-19 impacted organizations, it would be fair to say that although a good portion of the work force could work from home, most organizations did not encourage it. In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Statistics found 43.6% of American Workers could telework[3], while about 33% of those who could, did not. For many organizations, COVID-19 forced the issue.

So, what's happened since? Some companies, tech in particular[4], have decided to go remote forever, some are considering a flexible remote strategy, while others are conducting a "wait and see" approach. The biggest shift though may be with employees. An IBM survey found 58% of people currently working remotely would like to continue to do so[5], with 80% responding that they'd like to do so at least occasionally.

At the end of the day, even if there's a vaccine for COVID-19, if employees and employers find remote working to be an effective and flexible way to work, it's here to stay. The longer people work remotely, the more acceptable and desirable it will become.

3 https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/article/ability-to-work-from-home.htm#_edn4
4 https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/22/tech/work-from-home-companies/index.html
5 https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/covid-19-trilemma

An ITAM Program Can Effectively Meet the Challenge of Remote Work

Previous to this recent crisis, most organizations—if they weren't global or with multiple locations—mainly had to deal with the assets that were located within a brick building somewhere. And for some of these companies an Excel spreadsheet or a basic ITAM solution would do. The core functions of managing IT assets, understanding who has control of an asset and where it is located along with available hardware inventories, software licenses and supplier contracts could in some cases be handled by these rudimentary solutions.

Since the expansion into remote work, one of the greatest challenges IT now faces is one of oversight , whether it's ensuring people have the appropriate equipment and software to be able to work from home, keeping track of those assets, and perhaps most-importantly, ensuring security of devices in general, and in locations that IT can't directly control.

The reliance of an organization on personal assets and cloud infrastructure makes it challenging for companies to protect and control data. Personal assets are generally more vulnerable to be stolen, lost or hacked.

But overall, every asset an organization owns will have some level of risk associated to it. Which is why it's absolutely critical to have up-to-date asset information and know what employees have, what's running on those devices, the status of those devices, their security level and what you have in inventory regarding actual hardware and software licenses. When a crisis strikes, if you want the organization to get back up and running quickly, then a modern, ITAM program is absolutely necessary.

Some other common scenarios IT is now facing include:

How do I get assets into the hands of new remote employees?

How do I get assets back when they leave? What logistics are involved?

What assets do employees need to maintain productivity?

Do we have inventory or do we need to purchase new assets? What assets do we keep in stock?

How do you identify which hardware assets need to be sanitized as employees return to offices?

What do people use if their assets are in need of repair?

How will we get assets in the next crisis? How has our supply chain been impacted? Can it be relied upon in the future?

What if people use their personal assets for corporate work? What security issues does that involve?

How do I keep software application licenses under control?

How do you keep everything secure, manage BYOD while also ensuring flexibility?

How do I identify, manage, and securely dispose of hardware assets, ensuring they are stripped of all personal and proprietary data?

What if employees decide to order hardware assets online? What if they aren't properly secured?

What if employees use authorized software but in an unauthorized way?

With all the collaborative tools that have been implemented in a very condensed timeframe, how do we manage and keep track?

An Effective ITAM Program Lets You Gain Control

The key to solid asset management is organized processes and data. Being prepared for any crisis means understanding how the process and your asset management data will be impacted. An effective ITAM program can help fill the gap of what assets are being used, who is using them and how, the available inventory, and the costs associated with their use. Asset Managers can play an important role by implementing and enforcing an ITAM policy and program that puts a company in a position to respond quickly and efficiently when a crisis arises. This ITAM program should be leveraged and used by everyone as a normal course of business, including asset managers, support desk agents, managers and end users. The mobilization and deployment of assets at the time of need is crucial.

ITAM Lets You Address Needs Quickly

No matter the type of crisis, addressing immediate needs is always the first step, which starts by having a complete understanding of your existing asset and inventory data. This is not just what devices individual employees have, or what software is on those devices, but understanding configuration data, contractual agreements, and other important elements of managing assets on a daily basis. With this knowledge available, IT can address needs quickly and if needed recreate an employees' environment and deliver it to their work or home location so work can continue with minimal interruption. The last issue you want is employees in a panic going around IT and then later asking for permission. Their path of least resistance today could be your headache tomorrow.

ITAM Lets You Understand What Assets People Need to Do Their Job

Understanding how people access the systems and information they need to do their job will help mitigate the next crisis and will improve remote work effectiveness. Through discovery and self-verification, organizations will understand the needs of a typical employee, which will help ensure their productivity at all times. Assets can be prioritized by importance or urgency, and if your asset management supports a service catalog, your knowledge can more effectively control which assets are given to whom, based on role. IT can take an active role by putting policies and guidelines in place ensuring that all employees are working within a safe computing environment, while getting their jobs done. Insight through asset management starts by tracking, gathering and documenting asset data.
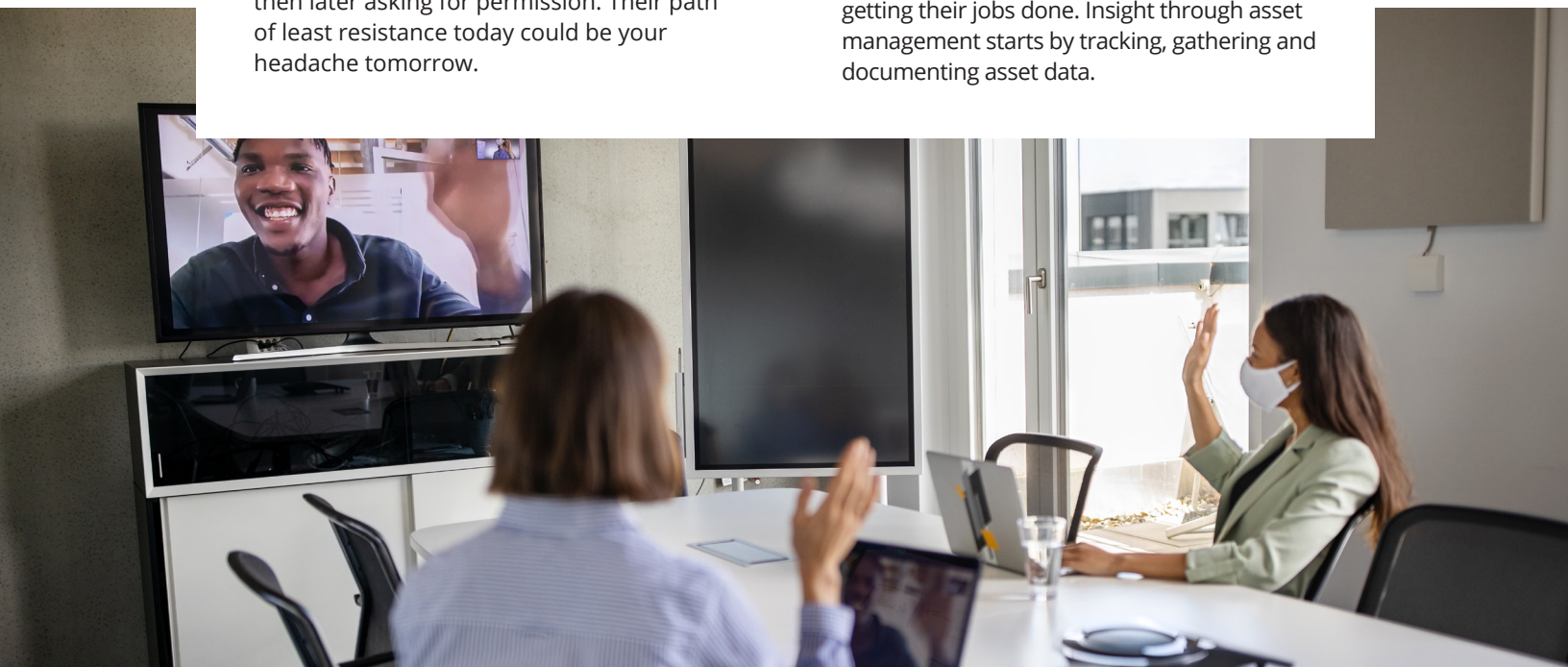
ITAM Lets You Effectively Manage Suppliers and Contracts

In a time of crisis, we've seen retail and supply chains get disrupted. Procurement will be able to handle the crisis much better if they already know the answers to some pertinent questions: Will needed assets be easily obtained? What type of crisis can cause issues with which assets? Will it be easier or even economical for an individual to purchase a certain asset on their own? Is this even permitted by policy? Can certain assets be stockpiled? When it comes right down to it, to mitigate a crisis, organizations have to make decisions fast so IT can react fast. Understanding your assets, the suppliers and the contracts, will help you to understand how you'll be able to respond in the event of a crisis.

ITAM Lets You Be More Proactive

Business continuity is about anticipating a crisis and planning for issues. Asset Management can contribute much to the execution of strategic plans by having a more proactive understanding of assets and their usage. This is best achieved by including cloud and personal assets and relating the individual to the services they need to do their job (or someone else's). It's a gap that needs to be addressed going forward and successful asset managers are all about planning and preparation based on the best available data.
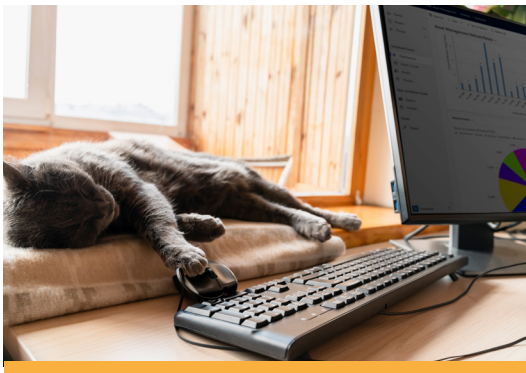
ITAM Lets You Manage Risk More Effectively

All assets carry with it a fundamental risk to the organization by the mere fact that they contain organizational data. Each asset carries different levels of risk, depending on the type of asset, the department, role or individual the asset is assigned to, the proprietary information contained on that asset, or the ability for an individual to access confidential information through that asset. The key to securing assets is having visibility into your endpoints, the who, what, when, where and how hardware and software assets are being used. The weakest link of an organization is the end point where the human being meets the machine. In a typical situation there are layers of risk; first, the actual physical device; then, there is the software system and the services being used on that device; next comes the data stored and downloaded onto the device; then finally, how the device is connected to everything else. An asset management program helps you become aware of and mitigate risk factors that an asset may present. You can only manage the risk of what you can see and know exists.
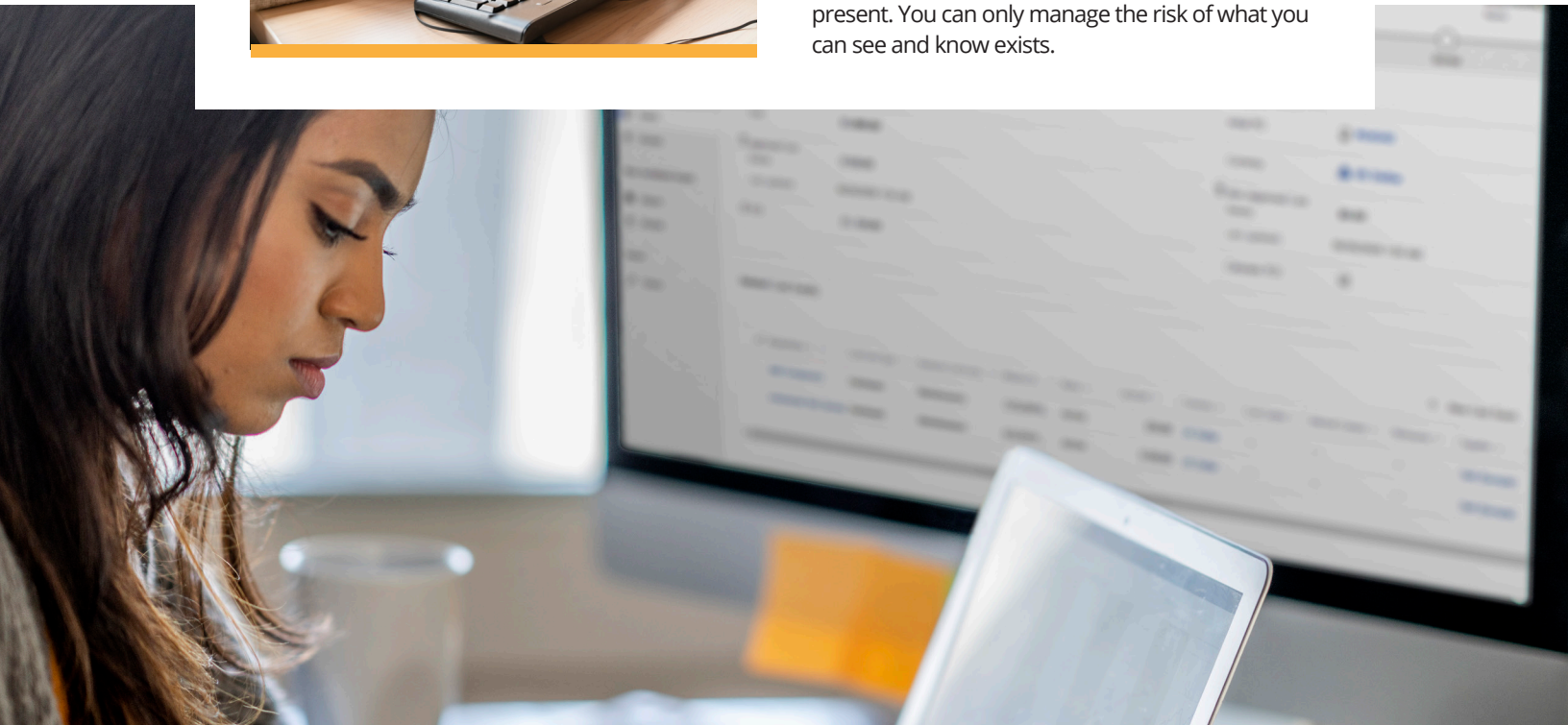
ITAM Programs Save the Day

Example 1:

A university needed to create a university-wide 911 directory to help students and faculty in need. As part of their asset management program, they utilized an asset registry to create a cross reference between phones, extensions and locations in the asset registry to create the directory. The asset registry that they had built over the previous 2 years was seen as the most credible and accurate source of data. Extending it and leveraging the built-in reporting was far easier than trying to maintain any independent or single function database. Already having an effective asset management program in place was key as it allowed the university to catalog the location of the IP phones so emergency services could locate the caller location.

Example 2:

When their state and city governments requested all companies to shut down their offices and work from home due to COVID-19, a financial services customer complied. Although most of their employees had assigned laptops, some assets had to be provided as they were not set up to work from home on a continued basis. The employees needed to be provided with equipment and access to their network for them to do their jobs. Since the employees worked mainly within offices, albeit scattered throughout the world, they hadn't previously relied on collaborative tools and employees had to quickly adapt to and utilize Microsoft Teams. Moreover, since data had now to be stored in the cloud or on-premise, this presented issues for IT. The task of outfitting one or two people is fairly routine but having to suddenly provide assets and remote access to over 5000 employees takes planning and effective tools to let employees securely access all the info they need to do their job. Luckily, the company already had an asset management program in-place. Although their asset management program wasn't as modern or effective as it could be, they had some understanding of what assets they had, who they were assigned to and what state they were in. Therefore, with a few bumps and some delays, they were able to get the employees up and running, albeit the COVID-19 crisis showed them how their processes and tools were lacking, and with a little help they've been able to improve their asset management program to provide better services to their remote workforce and prepare themselves to meet their new normal.

Conclusion

The most common type of crisis involves displacement of people and disruption of services. Hurricanes, tornados and floods are just some of the types of environmental crises that organizations have had to experience in the past, but COVID-19 was a global crisis that not only forced a new way of working but also spurred a discussion about how businesses can change the way they work in the future. This new way to work brings challenges, but an effective ITAM program lets you mitigate the effects of future crises and prepare your organization to meet those challenges with confidence and control.

serviceteam ITAM Can Help You Mitigate The Impact of a Crisis

The ServiceTeam ITAM Power App provides you with a modern, cloud-based ITAM solution that lets you effectively and efficiently manage and oversee your hardware, contract and software assets. Centralized Asset Management, Provance discovery gateways, out-of-the-box, yet configurable dashboards, charts and views are just some of the features that let you gain oversite of your assets and mitigate the impact of another crisis.

The Provance ServiceTeam Power App suite of products are infused with the same digital DNA as the Microsoft platforms, products and processes that drive your success today. Industry experts agree that by unifying onto a platform you can achieve more insights, innovation, business agility, and take smarter actions that will save you money on your path to the modern world of work.

For more information on how ServiceTeam ITAM can help you, visit Provance.com/ITAM, or contact us at info@provance.com.