

DATABASE

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Selecting a Remote DBA: The Top 10 Traits That Create Value

By Mark Vorholt

Database management ranks as one of the three fastest-growing areas within America's IT departments, according to RHI Consulting's recent survey of over 1400 CIOs. So choosing and implementing an effective database management strategy is a chief IT concern.

But in today's economy, achieving database management goals can be a painful, uphill climb. Shrinking IT budgets are forcing companies to reduce the size of their DBA staffs, even though e-business infrastructures are requiring stronger database support to sustain 24 / 365 operations. Meanwhile, databases are growing in size and complexity, making the role of the already overburdened DBA increasingly difficult. And further intensifying the situation is the need to store and manage the huge influx of corporate data pouring in from modern Web-based applications.

While the road leading to successful database management looks rocky, many companies are sidestepping the obstacles by turning to an emerging outsourcing services company—the remote database administrator or "remote DBA." Remote DBAs specialize in delivering database administration services via the Internet on a 24 / 365 basis. Services of the premier remote DBA providers include all the duties of a full-time DBA like monitoring, maintenance, performance tuning, backup, recovery, and reporting. So companies are able to outsource specific DBA functions without relinquishing control of the entire infrastructure or having to invest in the resources to exclusively handle database support in-house.

IT industry analysts agree, remote DBA services can deliver substantial advantages including reduced database support costs, improved system availability, and increased utilization of internal DBAs toward strategic goals. But it is important that prospective buyers carefully evaluate the capabilities of a remote DBA prior to entering into a service agreement. By verifying that the provider possesses the following ten industry-proven attributes, companies can ensure that they will derive optimum quality and value from the remote DBA's services.

10 Key Remote DBA Traits

1. Experience of Technical Staff

A company's service will only be as

good as the skills of its people, so evaluate this aspect thoroughly. Determine the experience level of the remote DBA's staff. Does the company employ senior DBAs with a solid tenure of real industry experience or junior DBAs with less than five years in the trenches? Organizations should also find out the ratio of time that senior- versus junior- level DBAs will devote to their account. Last, look at technical certifications. The remote DBA's staff should be certified in the database technologies being supported (Oracle, Sybase, SQL Server, and so forth.).

2. Multi-Platform Support

Most organizations today run multiple database platforms. Look for a remote DBA with the capability of supporting all major database flavors including Oracle, Sybase, Informix, MS SQL Server, and UDB DB2. Multiple-platform competency ensures that the remote DBA will be scalable to meet growing business needs if the client decides to standardize on a new platform or to add support in the future. Keeping database support services under one roof also eliminates the headaches of working with numerous vendors.

3. Centralized Operations Center

Determine how the remote DBA tracks monitored events. If the company uses a one-to-one notification architecture, where one staff member is responsible for the server status via e-mail or pager, the monitoring process is likely to break down due to personnel lapses or single point-of-failure. One-to-one notification is unreliable and typically results in poor response times. Remote DBAs that process monitored events from a centralized operations center eliminate these concerns by using automated processes to track the status of each event from the time of first occurrence through problem resolution.

4. Industry-Standard Tools

Remote DBAs must use an industry-standard, market-tested agent technology (e.g. BMC Software's PATROL) in order to ensure reliability and compatibility with clients' database management systems, operating systems,

networks, and other monitors. Homegrown monitoring scripts do not undergo the extensive software tests necessary to ensure reliability and compatibility. Also, consider the level of automation the remote DBA uses within its monitoring process for event detection and management. Remote DBAs with a higher degree of automation are better suited to meet service level agreement (SLA) requirements.

5. True 24 / 365 Support

Verify that the remote DBA performs "true 24 / 365 support," meaning continuous monitoring plus full database administration activities (e.g. tuning, maintenance, backup, recovery, reporting, etc.). Remote DBAs that deliver comprehensive DBA support services, versus monitoring only, offer significantly greater value to clients based on their ability to perform both corrective and preventive DBA functions 'round the clock. With true 24 X 365 support in place, companies are able to solve their off-hour support challenges, ensure continuous database operations, and shift tactical database support responsibilities from internal DBAs to the remote DBA. Consequently, internal DBAs can be re-deployed to work on high-return implementation and development projects.

6. Repeatable Process

Remote DBAs must standardize their service delivery upon an industry-tested, repeatable process that is clearly defined. The process should integrate operational procedures for notification and management of database events, problem resolution, and coordinating with other service providers. According to META Group, remote DBAs must be able to retain 80 percent of their operational processes across their customer base to remain successful. Remote DBAs too eager to customize may indicate a firm with poor operational processes.

7. Service Level Management

Service level management enables clients to measure whether set objectives are being met. In this way, clients can calculate value. Remote DBAs should supply their clients with online reports illustrating service level

metrics including availability, recovery, performance, and technical responsiveness.

8. Web Portal

Because remote DBAs work off-site, a Web portal must exist to facilitate continuous communication between the remote DBA and the client. Verify that the remote DBA uses a Web portal to deliver 24 / 365 access to graphical reports showing database performance trends, work queues, and service level status. Clients should be able to view and produce these reports as needed. The portal should enable clients to request technical assistance and to check problem resolution statuses. Without online accessibility, organizations risk losing control of their environment.

9. Strategic Channel Partnerships

Channel partnerships and certifications from industry-leading vendors are positive indicators of a remote DBA's viability. Strong partner relationships demonstrate that the remote DBA has been evaluated by other credible companies and recognized as having a sound business model.

10. Value

The actual value that the remote DBA's services add to an organization must offset the relative costs. Before buying, estimate potential value by weighing the cost of attaining service levels via the remote DBA's services against the actual business savings. Remote DBAs should demonstrate objective proof of value by providing at least three personal testimonies from its existing client base. Verify that the remote DBA's services have produced real savings and a positive experience for these clients

Database management challenges will not get any easier in the future. But organizations can worry less about the problems and focus more on building core strengths by outsourcing database support functions to a remote DBA with industry-proven qualifications.

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