

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO vCIO SERVICES

How to Sell Your MSP
as a Strategic Partner

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SECURE. SCALE.



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How to Sell Your MSP
as a Strategic Partner

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Introduction

Fueled by the increasing adoption and speed of digital transformation, managed services are experiencing impressive growth—by 2026, the global Managed Services Provider (MSP) market is expected to reach \$274.2 billion with a compound annual growth rate of 11.2 percent over five years. Also on the rise are customer expectations. It's not enough anymore to provide technical recommendations; customers today are looking for less sales and more strategy from their technology partners.

For today's MSPs, a combination of technical expertise and strategic insight is critical to demonstrating your value, building client relationships and closing new business. With the MSP landscape becoming more saturated, providers looking to demonstrate value to their customers are adding virtual Chief Information Officer (vCIO) services to their offering. The actualization of “less service and more strategy,” vCIOs are trusted advisors focused on helping customers meet their strategic goals.

In this definitive guide, you'll learn how the changing business and IT landscape has led to the rise of managed services, and how today's providers are offering vCIO services to increase their value to current clients and close new business. You'll learn:

- **What a vCIO is and why it is an essential role at your MSP**
- **How vCIOs differ from Account Managers**
- **Essential skills and tools for vCIOs to build relationships and demonstrate value**
- **How to take your MSP from vendor to trusted advisor with our vCIO roadmap**

Nearly 90 percent of MSPs consider the expansion of their service offerings important. The most successful MSPs have added about 4 to 5 new services offerings in the past two years.



The Rise of Digital Business



The past few years have seen an exponential increase in digital services and applications as more businesses move their operations to the cloud and embrace a distributed workforce. Business applications include productivity, security, communications, operational and other solutions that help keep businesses running smoothly and employees connected.

From 2018 to 2019, app usage was up over 30 percent, with companies using an average of 137 business applications. The COVID-19 pandemic created even more demand, as businesses looked for new ways to automate processes, increase productivity and lower costs, with 76 percent of businesses using the pandemic as a catalyst to implement long-term IT changes.



WORKING FROM COUCH? THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT.

- 72 percent of users access applications at work
- The average employee uses 8 apps
- Zoom has over 300 million meeting participants per day

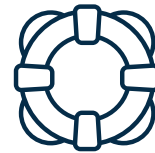
SERVICES OVERLOAD

In an ideal world, business services and applications work together to streamline operations and help businesses run more smoothly. In reality, trying to juggle services, apps and devices for hundreds of users creates a set of problems unique to today's IT departments.

Already overburdened from managing disparate systems and pieced-together tech stacks, IT departments turned to MSPs to help them upgrade and overhaul systems to accommodate the trend toward hybrid workplaces.



MSPs to the Rescue



Managed Services Providers emerged in the early 2000s as a solution for exhausted IT departments looking to unload the burden of service and application management. Since then, MSPs have become an essential part of business operations with 75 percent of SMBs outsourcing some of their IT to a managed service provider. In addition to freeing up time for IT departments, consolidating services under one provider helps streamline operations and reduce costs—it's estimated that managed services reduce IT costs by 25-45 percent and increase operational efficiency by 45-65 percent.

With numbers like those, it's easy to see why companies choose to adopt managed services, but many only call their provider when something goes wrong and MSPs can struggle to move past the break-fix relationship. Businesses today are looking for MSPs that can provide service *and* add strategic insight, and successful MSPs are pivoting to focus on strategy to upsell current customers and close new accounts.

FROM BREAK-FIX TO MANAGED SERVICES

Make the leap from project work to managed services through automation. [Learn how.](#)

SECURITY

The more services that are granted access to a company's data, the greater the chance of a security breach that can expose organizational or customer information. According to [Juniper Research](#), cybercrimes cost businesses \$2 trillion in 2019, and security breaches can leave data inaccessible for weeks at a time, bringing operations to a halt. User-downloaded apps are particularly vulnerable to security threats considering the general weakness of user passwords and the lack of standardized two-factor authentication processes.

VISIBILITY

The ease with which employees can download and install applications on company devices creates a lack of visibility that can leave IT departments playing a costly game of catch-up. Over 70 percent of businesses have orphaned subscriptions, with three being the average. These ownerless apps, when they lapse or are deleted, can cause service interruptions or worse, and unused subscription costs can impact a company's bottom line.

PRODUCTIVITY

Manually managing IT services and applications is time consuming. Teams can waste days searching for subscription information, helping users manage their apps and digging through data to build reports.

SECURITY SPOTLIGHT: MULTI-FACTOR AUTHENTICATION

- 81 percent of breaches are caused by credential theft
- 73 percent of passwords are duplicates
- 50 percent of employees use non-approved apps

Multi-factor authentication (MFA) prevents 99.9 percent of these attacks



vCIOs – Turning Managed Services Into Strategic Partnerships



As consumer services become more personalized, those trends are being reflected in the business world. Customer experience is more important than ever, with 86 percent of B2B buyers willing to pay more for great customer experience. A great experience starts with understanding the unique need of your customers.

WHAT IS A vCIO?

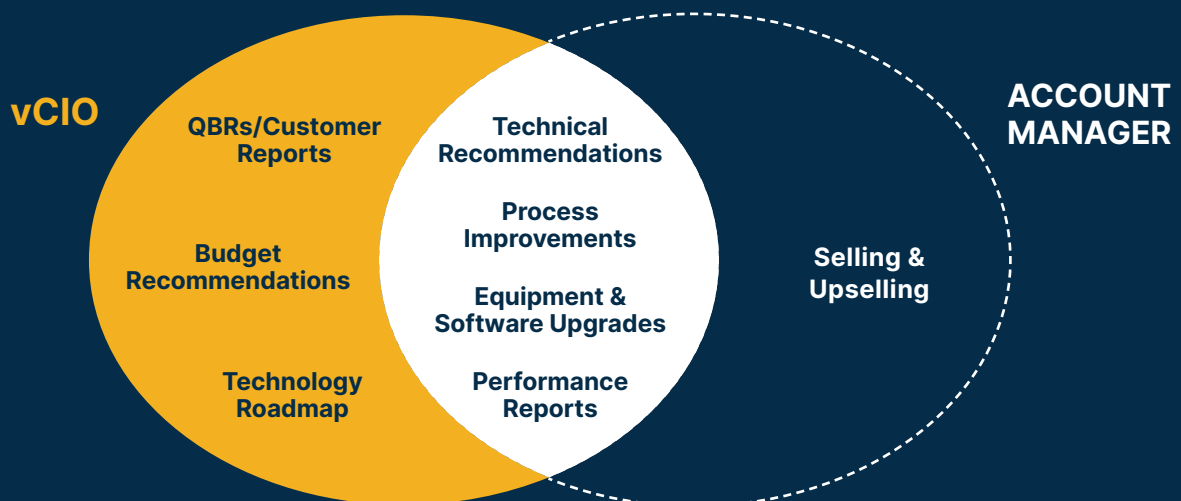
A virtual Chief Information Officer (vCIO), or Trusted Advisor, provides technology-focused strategic direction and insight for companies that do not have an in-house CIO. A mix of both technology and business, vCIOs are focused on helping their customers achieve goals by providing advice and best practices about technology, resources and personnel. vCIOs deliver reports, help develop technology roadmaps and recommend tech upgrades or cost-savings opportunities.

HAT TRICK

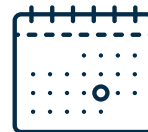
51 percent of MSPs say they wear multiple hats when managing a customer and that their role is a mix of technical and business responsibilities.

ACCOUNT MANAGER vs vCIO

Account Managers and vCIOs share many of the same responsibilities, but vCIOs typically dive deeper into customer issues and provide more strategic direction than Account Managers. Sometimes though, the difference between Account Manager and vCIO comes down to the size of your customer and their individual needs.



vCIOs: A Day in the Life



At its core, being a vCIO is all about building and growing relationships. vCIOs should be involved in customer journey from the beginning—from evaluating a potential customer's fit through onboarding to ongoing reporting, a vCIO should provide strategic insight and direction that helps turn new customers into loyal partners. Customers should see your MSP as an extension of their IT department; someone who they can count on to provide data-driven recommendations based on a deep understanding of their business goals.



UNDERSTAND YOUR BUYER JOURNEY

The buyer journey consists of four main stages, each with specific needs. It's important to understand buyer journeys to be able to target your outreach with the right message to grab attention and convert customers.

1. AWARENESS

Buyers at the Awareness stage are searching for answers—they have a problem to solve and will give priority to sources that help frame their issue, contextualize it in terms of their job function, and provide possible solutions. At this stage it's important to educate buyers about the benefits of your service. For instance, security is a top concern for many companies so you might write a blog or email on security issues facing IT departments post-COVID or make a security checklist for companies to use when evaluating an MSP.

2. EVALUATION

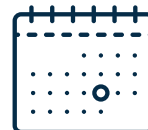
The next stage of the buying cycle is evaluation, where buyers have identified their finalists and will be doing a more in-depth review of your service offering. For this stage, case studies and other customer testimonials or reviews can give you an edge. Buyers want to see how your solutions have worked for other companies and if your current clients are happy with your services. If you don't have a stash of case studies or testimonials you can access, try setting up a meet-and-greet with you, your prospect and one of your current, happy customers for a live referral.

3. DECISION

Seventy-seven percent of B2B buyers conduct an ROI analysis before making a purchase decision. Demonstrating the value of your service in terms of dollars and budget can help you upsell your current customers and earn new business. One way to do this is to perform a proactive analysis of customer systems, using a tool like Liongard, to pull information on users, licenses and applications that will help you identify opportunities for cost-savings and budget optimization.



vCIOs: A Day in the Life



4. POST-SALE/ONBOARDING

You've booked new business, but now what? The first weeks of a new managed services contract are the most critical. If done correctly, onboarding serves as a springboard into a mutually beneficial, comfortable and reliable relationship between your MSP and your customer. Over the long run, this relationship will result in greater revenue and higher satisfaction for your customer—and your team.

TIPS FOR ONBOARDING SUCCESS

- Develop a consistent onboarding process and a standardized approach to service.
- Deliver an excellent customer experience that builds loyalty and satisfaction.
- Leverage automation to perform discovery and update it continuously.
- Create detailed documentation, empowering everyone on the team to help customers.

Learn more about perfecting your onboarding process in our [Definitive Guide to Onboarding](#).

UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS

Buyers today have access to more options than ever before and are looking for vendors who understand the complexities of their business and can speak to their personal needs. In fact, 72 percent expect vendors to provide a personalized experience based on their unique business objectives. To stand out, MSPs need to focus on tailoring their recommendations and services for each customer instead of offering the same solution to everyone.

For instance, you might have experience with HIPAA compliance that will help you develop trust with new healthcare customers and provide an opportunity to take a more impactful position within the organization. You can customize your outreach efforts or make strategic decisions about which customers to pursue or try and upsell.

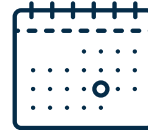
And all that effort pays off—personalizing your buyer experience can reduce customer acquisition costs by 50 percent.

SALES TIP: LISTEN UP

69 percent of buyers say that the quickest way to win their trust is by listening to their individual needs.



vCIOs: A Day in the Life



PROVIDE STRATEGIC DIRECTION

When it comes to making purchase decisions or expanding existing services, buyers are looking for more than just tech recommendations. With most of the sales process now taking place entirely online, when buyers engage with salespeople, they are looking for someone who can add value beyond just recommending a product. Nearly 90 percent of buyers say they are only willing to make a final purchase if they view a salesperson as a trusted advisor, making strategic services a critical offering for MSPs.

One way to establish trust early in the relationship and demonstrate your strategic value as an MSP is during your initial customer evaluation. Many MSPs focus initial evaluations on technology upgrades or other low hanging fruit. A more strategic approach would be to use a platform like Liongard to gather historical data on customer systems, which allows you to identify technology issues at their root and provide forever solutions, not just break-fix band-aids.

CLOSE MORE ACCOUNTS WITH BETTER DATA

Learn how 5th Gear Technology used Liongard's Timeline feature to close two accounts—totaling \$65,000 in ARR.

[Read the case study.](#)



Tools of the Trade



IT'S ALL ABOUT THAT DATA

The first step in creating a strategic plan for your customers is digging into the data. How did your customer's systems perform last quarter? Are any security certificates expired? Do any past employees still have systems access? When data rules everything around your MSP, insights are easy to find. Translating a mountain of customer data into actionable insights is a crucial function of a vCIO, and any recommendations should be data-driven and based on your customer's goals.

Customer reports are the easiest way to present data to your customers in a way that's easy for them to understand. There are three main types of reports you should focus on:

Everyday "Pulse" Dashboards

"Pulse" dashboards and reports allow you to quickly check the health and status of all your customer accounts without lifting a finger. Your daily pulse dashboard should identify areas your team needs to work on, critical customer issues that require immediate attention, and items your team can work on throughout the day.

Customer Reports and QBRs

To elevate your role from vendor to trusted advisor, leverage tailored reports to show your customer how you can help them meet their strategic goals. These custom reports should include an overview of MSP performance, a summary of recently resolved and current open issues, as well as recommended upgrades or improvements.

vCIO-Specific Reports

vCIO reports are the most in-depth and address the organizational challenges customers face, like identifying cost-saving opportunities, redundant or antiquated systems, and ways to optimize their tech stack. Typical reports at this level should include goals and strategic priorities, insight on regulatory and compliance issues, an evaluation of current resources and how you help them achieve their strategic goals, and opportunities to create cost-savings and improve operational efficiencies.



REPORTS: THE ROAD TO REVENUE

33 percent of MSPs say growing revenue is a major focus.

The best way to grow revenue is to continue delivering value to your customer, and one way to add value is via customer reports, such as QBRs or Annual Reports.

[Learn more about the power of reporting.](#)



Tools of the Trade



SHOW THEM THE MONEY

80 percent of businesses expect IT budgets to grow or stay steady this year, so helping your customers optimize their current dollars and prepare for future spending needs is a key skill for any vCIO. Helping your customers realize the value of their current technology and how it can be used to streamline business processes will help establish your MSP as a strategic partner.

HELP YOUR CUSTOMERS HIT THEIR BUDGET GOALS

Keep these questions in mind when you're helping your customer plan their IT budgets:

- **What are the top business objectives for the company?**
- **Which IT project will have the most ROI?**
- **Are duplicate software licenses causing duplicate costs?**
- **Will a hardware upgrade now save money in the long run?**
- **Does your customer really need to hire another IT employee?**
- **Are there any redundant applications or systems?**
- **Which departments does IT need to work with to meet their goals?**
- **How will you receive executive buy-in to put your budget plans into action?**

WHERE WE'RE GOING, WE DO NEED ROADS

Now that you understand your customer's business and know their goals and IT needs, it's time to combine that wealth of knowledge into an actionable roadmap. Technology roadmaps give your customers a clear path to achieve their goals—they help business leaders see and understand how their tech stack will support and drive growth both now and in the future.

Your roadmap should build on the reports and budget recommendations you've created and should accomplish three main goals:

1. **Help IT leadership** guide discussion and decision-making with the executive team, getting stakeholders on the same page in terms of top goals and project priorities.
2. **Provide a detailed framework** for improvements with anticipated needs, budget considerations and a plan for implementation.
3. **Increase transparency and visibility** throughout the organization by helping the whole team understand project timelines and deliverables so they can make strategic decisions within their departments.



vCIO Roadmap



YOUR NEXT HIRE OR PROMOTION SHOULD BE A vCIO

In the next year, 71 percent of MSPs plan to hire between 1-5 new employees. If your MSP is focused on growth, then your next hire should be a vCIO—it's a value add for your customers and your MSP. vCIOs can provide insight during customer evaluations to determine if a customer is the right fit, so you're only onboarding customers who will help scale your business.

DON'T BE A STRANGER

Ongoing communication helps establish your MSP as a partner and not just another technology vendor. Be proactive in your communications—reach out to your customers to see how they are doing and if they're encountering any roadblocks, and proactively schedule meetings or send reports to keep your services, and their technology needs, top of mind. Keep in mind these aren't calls for upsells, but genuine wellness checks that let your customers know you are prioritizing their account and business goals.

SHOW AND TELL

When it comes to results, don't be shy about showing off. If your ideas resulted in productivity gains, cost savings or process improvements, be sure to call out successes in your next customer meeting. Continually demonstrating the value you bring to the company is a surefire way to earn a seat at the table and turn customers into partners.

YOUR QBR CHECKLIST

You may only get in front of this group of people once a quarter, so make it count. A QBR should provide a transparent overview of operations and pertinent details on specific areas of service. The following represents typical areas of an MSP's QBR, along with some tips to maximize your impact.

- **Executive summary** — A high-level, easy-to-read report of recent events, successes and issues that occurred in the past quarter, along with opportunities for the future. Colorful charts, graphs and numbers make a huge visual statement in just a glance.
- **Service ticket review** — Review how your team has handled the volume of tickets coming in.
- **Service Level Agreement (SLA) review** — Compare the service you agreed to provide to the actual service you provided over the last quarter, highlighting higher performance levels or discussing issues or disputes.
- **Technical review** — This is where you really show your MSP's value, discussing what you've done to "earn your keep," including major issues you've thwarted or problems you've solved for your customer.
- **Endpoint management review** — What has your MSP done to ensure endpoint devices remain secure and up to date? Your customer probably doesn't know (especially if you're doing it well), so now's the time to share details.
- **Network security and management** — With security more top-of-mind than ever, your customers want to know exactly what you're doing to manage and protect their networks from security breaches.
- **Looking ahead** — A QBR shouldn't be the first time your customer hears about an issue, so this is the time to start discussing solutions and options—including projects currently underway—along with related budgetary and timeline details.



Take the First Step



The road to positioning your MSP as a vCIO starts with understanding your customers and their needs. A personalized customer experience, from prospect to onboarding and beyond, is crucial to developing a partnership with your customers that extends beyond managed services to strategic initiatives.

WE'VE GOT YOUR BACK

Liongard was founded by former MSP owners who understand the struggles today's firms face in growing client relationships and scaling their business. We built our platform with MSPs in mind, offering unified visibility across all your customer systems—taking you from data to actionable insights as quickly as possible.

Standardize, secure and scale your IT Managed Services with Liongard, the only automation platform that delivers unified visibility across the stack. With a global partner base, Liongard is changing the way MSPs manage and protect thousands of businesses worldwide. Ready to manage modern IT with confidence? Learn more at LIONGARD.COM.

**Discover how Liongard can support your vCIO and strategic account management efforts.
Schedule a demo today for a custom walk-through of our platform.**

