



White Paper

The Data Center and Cloud Infrastructure Boom: Is Your Sales/Engineering Team Equipped to Win its Share of the Business?

The Power of a Collaborative Solution Design Platform in Winning More Business, Boosting Sales/Engineering Productivity, and Delivering More Effective and Profitable Enterprise Cloud and Data Center Solutions

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The rush to build enterprise clouds and data centers is an explosive megatrend — and a golden opportunity for systems integrators (SIs), service providers, and resellers to make money as enterprise IT chases this powerful new paradigm.

The era of selling CPE boxes and simple connectivity is gone forever. Today, the market has expanded into the much broader and fast-moving realm of cloud, virtual systems, and managed services.

Unfortunately, while fresh selling opportunities are always welcome, in this case, expanding the market has come at a cost: the entry of far greater competition. Today's solution providers no longer compete solely with a known set of usual suspects. They compete just as strongly with cloud providers, systems integrators (SIs), and service providers of all stripes, all of whom partner with a broad range of network equipment suppliers, and application and software vendors.

Whenever the SI becomes the prime integrator and “controls” the enterprise account, the service provider is in danger of being relegated to a minor, marginally profitable role. The same goes if the roles are reversed. So the race is on to see who gets to “own” the enterprise customer relationship, for the owner is the one who makes the most money and gets to insert its services and products into the enterprise's IT/communications fabric.

The best platform should not be designed for the big guys alone. Smaller solution providers should also be able to get into the game: buy a basic module to get rolling.

How Can a Solution Provider Gain an Edge Against its Many Rivals?

So who will the winning players be? In some cases, long-term experience at an account or personal relationships with senior executives will win the day. However, a solution provider has little control over those factors.

Where a provider has great leverage, however, is its ability to quickly grasp the enterprise's requirements, translate them into compelling designs, and get quotes at a reasonable price point to the buyer.

Design requirements have changed drastically in the last few years. While the previous market lived on one-off designs held in the heads of experts or their spreadsheets, today the key dynamic is around design reuse, scaling up, and delivering a modestly customized design based on the reference designs or “cookie cutter” templates of successful past projects.

In other words, the richest prizes go to the solution providers who are faster and better organized than their rivals. To win, a provider must coordinate better, scale its operation, and pump designs and proposals out the door with great speed — and reduce the design errors that can lead to downstream provisioning issues and unhappy customer.

Now to be honest, for many solution providers, superior “speed” and “organization” is a tall order because...

- Sales lacks access to the design knowledge needed to fully qualify and guide prospects;

Today's solution providers compete with cloud providers, systems integrators (SIs), and service providers of all stripes.

- Engineers are slowed by rapidly changing product catalogs and design requirements scattered across many spreadsheets; and
- Senior design experts are overloaded and lack a mechanism to delegate tasks and guide the work of less-qualified engineers.

The result is that solution providers lose business they should rightly win because their designs: take too long to complete and quote; lack sufficient accuracy, detail, and options; and can't be changed on-the-fly to meet the customer's price point or last minute requirements.

A Framework for a Collaborative Solution Design Platform

When you boil it all down: the complexity of the solutions, the broadened scope, the need for reference designs, and the larger number of competing providers — all point to the need for a superior **collaborative solution design platform** that manages complex project information and enables your team to share information and thereby accelerate the number of quality proposals you can deliver to prospects.

By now it should be clear: solution providers whose primary means of collaboration is emailing spreadsheets to each other are just not equipped for the rapid cycling of designs and efficient sales-to-customer interaction needed in this new cloud/data center era.

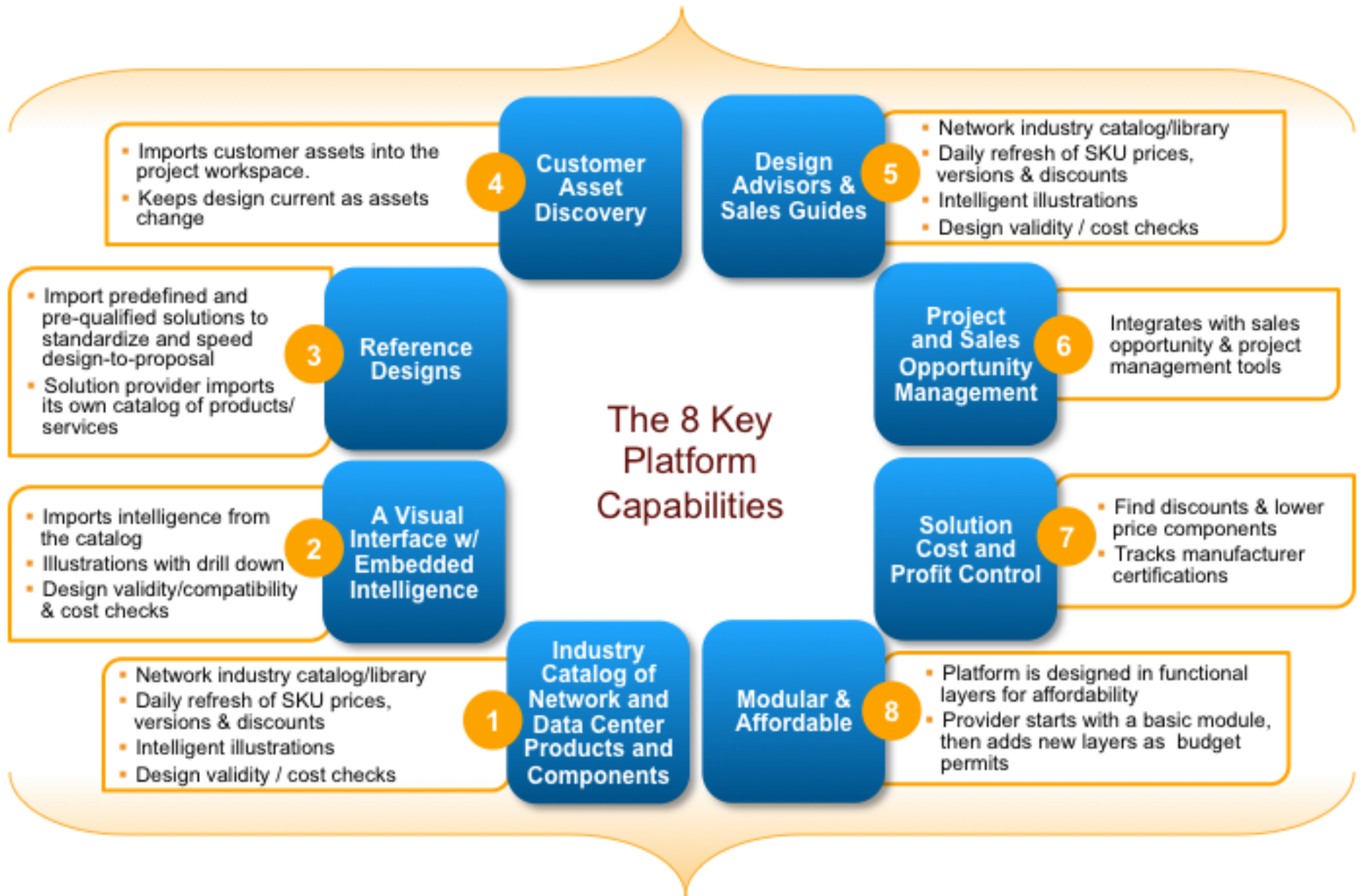
So what should you be looking for in a platform? Getting answers to that question is precisely the goal of this paper. In the next few pages, I will paint a picture of what an ideal platform looks like. And in that way you're better informed and can better assess whether a particular platform is right for your team.

After getting multiple briefings, talking to two solution providers using these platforms, and fathoming the myriad features, I've narrowed down the key capabilities of an ideal platform to these eight:

1. Industry Catalog of Network and Data Center Products and Components
2. A Visual Interface with Embedded Intelligence
3. Reference Designs
4. Customer Asset Discovery
5. Design Advisors and Sales Guides
6. Project and Sales Opportunity Management
7. Solution Cost and Profit Control
8. Modular and Affordable Platform

I'll now describe each of these capabilities so you'll fully understand why they are important and what benefits these platform capabilities should deliver. The eight capabilities are further illustrated in the accompanying diagram.

Collaborative Solution Design System for Enterprise Cloud & Data Center Solutions



Expected System Benefits

The Customer

- Delighted customers get quicker, more accurate designs
- Faster time-to-value for customer as designs are implemented fast
- Leverages customer's assets, saving money and simplifying
- Automated discovery of customer's assets enables greater accuracy
- Asset inventory is constantly updated from pre-sales to order

Sales

- Advisors provide Q&A to better qualify prospects.
- Faster proposals / modifications
- Able to offer multiple options in the proposals
- Pre-qualified reference designs smooth customer interactions
- Latest designs and status pushed down to sales
- Sales & solutions engineers collaborate better
- Repository enables new salespeople to quickly understand accounts

Design

- Checks design for valid equipment and compatibility
- Designs can be built on best practices & pre-certified designs
- Advisors enable engineers to get design guidance
- Drag design objects into project and get illustrations
- Highly skilled engineers can off-load less critical tasks
- Auto-discover the customer's current infrastructure
- Catalogs, asset discovery, and integration deliver more accurate designs
- Experts in various domains of the design can collaborate better
- Top down design ensures standardization and cost savings
- Leverage built-in regional provisioning rules in the design

The Business

- Shorter design times deliver more profitable business
- Design analysis finds alternate lower cost components
- Able to order the right equipment more reliably
- Central repository maintains continuity if senior people leave
- Accurate & fast handoff to ordering speeds design-to-cash
- Keeps track of cost-saving manufacturer certifications

Best of all, you no longer need to worry about staying current on a world of millions of SKUs and rapid-fire version changes.

The real value of a visual platform is that the equipment icon being dragged into the design workspace is much more than a static Visio or PowerPoint picture. It's an intelligent object!

The 8 Key Platform Capabilities

1 Industry Catalog of Network and Data Center Products and Components

The starting point for a collaborative solution design platform should be a multi-vendor catalog that maintains an up-to-date inventory of the network and data center products and components your team sells and incorporates in its designs.

It's no secret that equipment vendors like Juniper and Cisco change their part numbers every day. And solution providers who don't have a collaborative solution design platform with a multi-vendor catalog end up needing dedicated experts on staff to keep up with the daily changes from all their equipment vendors.

The state-of-the-art is to have the platform maintain such a catalog database with update feeds coming directly from the vendors. Subscribing to such a database not only saves the effort of collecting the information yourself, it can also automatically update your projects, identify design errors, and check the latest prices. Best of all, you no longer need to worry about staying current on a world of millions of SKUs and rapid-fire version changes.

2 A Visual Interface with Embedded Intelligence

Since the goal is to produce winning network and data center designs and proposals, it's only natural that a visual representation of the current design-in-progress is central to the ideal platform.

The ability to drag a SKU's graphic illustration from the industry catalog into the design workspace is certainly useful. However, the real value of a visual platform is that the illustration being dragged is much more than a static Visio or PowerPoint picture. It's an intelligent object! Meaning it inherits all the rich catalog information: pricing, visual icons, rules for configuration, validation rules, and more.

That's where the real power comes in. For instance, you can now automatically add up the cost of the visually represented solution at any point during the design process. Better yet, you can fully validate your design configuration. And since the equipment validation rules come from the equipment vendors themselves, the chance that a user will build a non-working design is greatly reduced.

Catching design errors early is critical. If you ship the wrong equipment to the customer, the cost of changing the equipment is nothing compared to its escalation's impact on customer satisfaction.

3 Reference Designs

Incorporating **industry-wide** resources and intelligence in the platform is key, but just as important is an ability to insert your own **provider-specific** best practices and reference architectures.

We know full well that the starting point of most designs is a successful solution sold to another enterprise customer. So a good platform will enable a provider to enhance the industry catalog with its unique services, equipment, content, and in-house processes. For instance, you will want to add your own commonly used reference designs to the industry library.

This is essential since your best practices and preconfigured content have been certified by your product management team, ensuring they will work out-of-the-box. And since these reference designs are a known quantity to your installers, using them effectively reduces downstream provisioning errors.

As a solution provider you may, for example, have standard security firewall designs based on the number of users, say: less than 50 users, 51 to 100 users, 101 to 500 users, and so forth. By having cookie cutter designs available in this way you not only get accurate designs but no longer need to expend resources to reinvent the wheel for every enterprise client.

4 Customer Asset Discovery

As you propose new cloud or data center designs to an enterprise, it makes sense to leverage equipment the customer already has rather than increase their costs (and your bid) unnecessarily.

This is where automated Asset Discovery or baseline intelligence gathering comes into play. Here the platform should import the customer's assets into your project so you can quickly identify the reusable equipment and what new equipment you need to sell to your client.

Now, particularly in large enterprise sales, it might take a year and multiple design iterations to finalize a solution and commence the install. In that time, the customer's environment is likely to have changed dramatically. So Asset Discovery is an invaluable way of keeping customer assets refreshed so the design reflects the latest actual infrastructure at the customer's site(s).

5 Design Advisors and Sales Guides

OK, we've talked about the industry-wide and provider-specific tools and technology built into a solid platform.

Here is the next test: how well can that intelligence and power be distributed to your sales and design teams who need to get the job done?

Remember your objective: to speed proposals through the design process without sacrificing quality. Well, the only real way to accomplish more work with the same resources is a wiser allocation of the workload.

This is precisely the role that design advisors and sales guides play in a state-of-the-art platform: they enable highly technical knowledge to trickle down and be made available to less knowledgeable people.

Junior design engineers benefit greatly from such advisors. The company does, too. Of particular concern is the need to keep inexperienced designers from veering away from standard reference designs, because if you allow that to happen, your ability to scale design operation suffers.

Through a series of popup questions, the salesperson can walk the client through the requirements and together they can arrive at a short list of pre-qualified solutions that meet the customer's budget.

Advisors and guides interact with users in different ways. Some platforms deliver the advice in real-time: the moment a component is pulled into the design canvas, an advisory message pops up. Another platform might be limited to providing off-line advice through a post-design batch report.

One particularly useful advisor enables top-down design. For example, an advisor can build out a computing infrastructure based on what the application needs or supports — performance requirements, number of users, etc. Those, in turn, get translated into the necessary compute power, storage capacity, etc. constraints, which ultimately result in the project's actual Bill of Materials.

In the past, a top down design was something a highly trained systems engineer created from a homegrown spreadsheet. But an advisor effectively distributes that engineer's knowledge via an on-line engine made available to multiple designers on the team.

Salespeople can also gain great benefit from advisors. For instance, a sales guide in a laptop or tablet can enable even a non-technical salesperson to get a lot accomplished during the first meeting with a prospective customer. Through a series of popup questions, the salesperson can walk the client through the requirements and together they can arrive at a short list of pre-qualified solutions that meet the customer's budget.

That's a tremendous time saver because it means an expert sales engineer doesn't have to be present on the customer call! Instead, the expert sales engineer is now free to meet with clients you're nearer to closing business with.

Frankly, it's in this advisor and sales guide area where a good platform really shines. By empowering people closer to the customer, such as sales people, with more intelligence, you're moving projects forward and closing them much faster.

6 Project and Sales Opportunity Management

A fully capable platform should also be able to track sales opportunities so solution provider executives can prioritize the deployment of scarce design and sales resources.

Another key feature — especially for large enterprise customers — is having a full project management capability to track workflow with Gantt charts showing which sub-projects jeopardize the schedule.

There are plenty of stand-alone commercial solutions on the market in these areas and no doubt your organization has already selected some. If so, it's important that the platform provide easy integration with them.

7 Solution Cost and Profit Control

In almost every solution, a provider can mix and match components from various suppliers to reduce costs and improve margins.

And to entice providers and keep them loyal, the network and infrastructure suppliers offer a broad array of deals, discounts, back-end rebates, product bundles, volume discounts, and certification programs.

But without a helpful tool, a solution provider can be overwhelmed with these discount and certification programs. There have been many cases where a sales engineer who held a critical certification left to take a job at another company. The result? The solution provider was no longer qualified to take advantage of a major rebate program — and lost big money.

So an ideal platform will manage the many discount and certification programs. Imagine the impact of collecting just 1% additional margin on every deal made throughout the year. That adds up to a lot of money.

In particular, the platform should track the following key money-saving opportunities:

- **Deal Registrations** – Advanced identification and analysis of deal qualification, ensuring the provider takes full advantage of any and all additional discount points offered for each and every sales opportunity.
- **Purchases** – By knowing the recent volume of business with a vendor, a provider can better negotiate price breaks.
- **Staff Certifications** – Tracking certification and required training on particular equipment or systems ties directly to front-end and back-end reward programs.
- **Compatible Products** – The platform’s up-to-date component pricing should instantly identify compatible products that qualify for higher rebates.
- **Bundling** – Many components can be purchased in lower-priced bundles, but unless there’s a mechanism for keeping track, those cost savings opportunities will simply not be noticed.

8 Modular and Affordable Platform

My last recommendation is around platform modularity and price.

We’ve been talking about the capabilities that an ideal collaborative solution design platform should contain. Now, I’m conscious of the fact that as soon as you call something “ideal” or “perfect”, somebody comes along and leapfrogs the market in ways we can’t predict.

And perhaps you’re already thinking, “Sure, and the last time I checked, something that’s perfect also has a high price attached to it.”

You’d be absolutely right. Yet one key quality of a “perfect” platform is that it is modular and affordable. The best platform should not be designed for the big guys alone. Smaller solution providers should also be able to get into the game: buy a basic module to get rolling, and then add capabilities later on in a layered approach as budget permits.

* * *

In conclusion, solution providers face a hard road ahead. The exciting thing is that the emerging cloud and data center market is full of rich opportunities to serve enterprise clients. Yet the sobering reality is that the only solution providers who can really win big are the ones who can get their sales and engineering teams to hustle and deliver quality design proposals at the same time.

Abstract, Executive Summary, Purpose of the Paper

The rush to build enterprise clouds and data centers is an explosive megatrend — and a golden opportunity for solution providers to make money as enterprise IT chases this powerful new paradigm.

But the richest prizes go only to sales and engineering teams who can drive an effective and streamlined requirements-to-design-to-order process. Many providers face major challenges moving forward: 1) sales lacks the design knowledge needed to fully qualify prospects; 2) engineers work with out-of-date product catalogs and inefficiently manage designs across siloed spreadsheets; and 3) senior design experts are overloaded and don't have a means to safely delegate work to less-qualified engineers. As a result, these providers lose business they should win. Their designs generally: take too long to complete and quote; lack sufficient accuracy, detail, and options; and can't be changed on-the-fly to meet the customer's price point or last minute requirements.

Happily, there is a path forward. The answer is for solution providers to equip themselves with a collaborative **solution design platform**, a proven way to speed up and synchronize the work of salespeople, engineers, and senior design experts.

This paper details the platform requirements and potential benefits of such a platform. Whittling down the dozens of features in these platforms into eight, easily-understood capabilities, the paper is an essential guide for solution providers contemplating such an investment.



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