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IBM PartnerWorld: The Evolution Continues with Unification of Competencies, Skills and Benefits

In 2020, the reimagination of IBM PartnerWorld began. Building upon that reimagination to align to the key partner business models of build, service, and sell, the program has further evolved to unify the way competencies are earned. Skills and benefits are also aligned across the three partner motions to give partners consistent enablement and go-to-market (GTM) support as they transition towards their new normal.

Market changes that are driving transformational needs

Previous market trends that were driving customer transformation were magnified by the impact of the pandemic; digital transformation became a necessity and not a choice. It is said that crises compel change but also in many cases crises can compel innovation as customers seek to address their own burning business issues as well as those of their own customers.

Consumerization of IT has been trending for a number of years, where businesses are looking to get the same consumer-like experience from their business IT. This trend has also been accelerated with a further shift to cloud, everything as a service, and solutions rather than upgrades.

In a time of tumultuous change, it is important to remember that many of these trends were already happening and in many cases were in roadmaps for customers and partners, yet widespread adoption was not compelled by events until now. What IDC sees is an accelerated mindset towards digital transformation that impacts customers' business.

The role of partners has magnified too as customers want more advice and help to navigate their IT journey through what are becoming more complex choices. In this new accelerated digital world, partners need to focus on their customer needs, and truly deliver complete solutions and this involves completing those solutions with their own IP or partnering within their ecosystem to do so. Partners also need to digitally transform themselves and invest in the leading-edge technologies so that they can truly be trusted digital advisors.

Partners must think about where their strengths are and specialize in the areas that have highest impact for the customers they serve. Many partners already had a focus on their own IP, as that would help to differentiate them; now their own IP should be focused on accelerators that help customers to reach better outcomes faster and to leverage technology to flatten the curve towards recovery and growth.

Reimagination of IBM PartnerWorld aligned to market trends

PartnerWorld's reimagination in 2020 was already aligned to support partners to address the market trends that were impacting customers. The reimagination also supported a major partner trend that IDC has been seeing for the past few years: namely that partner business models have been expanding and partners in most cases now deliver across several business models or activities as they seek to support the expanding customer needs as well as future proof their own business.

Partner programs in general have had to pivot over the past few years to support partners through changing times. The trend has been to reduce complexity and to enable partners to engage more consistently across business models.

Partner programs are important for vendors to both bring together all of the partner-facing elements in one place for ease of use for partners as well as for management and scale purposes.

PartnerWorld now allows partners to engage consistently across the program with three tracks for build, service and sell that aim to make the paths simpler and consistent. As partners expand their activities, the program allows them to cross-pollinate more easily and with flexibility. For each of the tracks, the enablement is common and allows partners to prioritize the expertise and capabilities they want to invest in, as well as identify further potential paths for the future.

All of the competencies, skills and benefits are clearly aligned within the tracks of build, service and sell, and are accessible through a single portal with the aim of reducing cycles for partners.

For all partners, there is no cost associated with competencies, based on the principle that this will enable the partner ecosystem, and help partners to differentiate.

And for partners new to PartnerWorld, there are low barriers to entry, including no-cost access to IBM's software catalog to support accelerated learning and engagement.

Partner program evolution is the new normal

At IDC we have been articulating that partner program evolution is like a boat trip with no end port. Partner programs should always be evolving as their goal is to support partners through change by being the place where partners can strike the balance between today's business and tomorrow's business opportunities.

The further evolution of PartnerWorld in 2021 builds upon the reimagination in 2020 and provides more depth for partners to differentiate across the three tracks of build, service and sell. There are new opportunities for partners to build competencies that align to the IBM hybrid cloud and AI vision as well as across the IBM portfolio.

There are significant "upgrades" across skills enablement, marketing and GTM support, financial and incentives programs, technical support and access, and several new competencies that address current customer opportunities for partners.

The mindset of IBM is to unify and expand the program to support partners as the market transforms.

The mindset for partners should be to "lean in" and leverage the investments IBM is making that align to the market opportunity.

Evolution is a continuous process of gradual modifications or changes

As Charles Darwin famously said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

IDC believes the IT market has and will always continue to change, customer needs will evolve depending on environmental circumstances, and that partners therefore must evolve their business models to address those needs. IBM business partners should 'lean in' to the evolution of the IBM PartnerWorld program evolution to support some of that change. The program unification and simplicity themes mean that partners can engage across the right tracks and opportunities for their specific business stages, and effectively balance their invest and build strategy for growing market opportunities.