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NEW SYSTEM HANG-UPS

The installation of your new telecommunications system is complete. But in many ways, your work has just begun.

You've survived all of the planning, internal politicking, and hand holding required to get a new telecommunications system up and running. Initial bugs in the technology have been ironed out, and employees have been calling, e-mailing, or Web conferencing with few hiccups. Congratulations flow like cheap champagne among the installation project team and its sponsors.

But soon, less cheerful reports start trickling in. People are confused about how to use a new unified voice-and-data messaging system. Staffers are having trouble getting through to the 800-number help desks of equipment manufacturers and wireless carriers. Web hosting services aren't performing as promised. Suddenly, all the backslapping begins to feel premature.

BY DAVE ZIELINSKI

ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY PULVER

Whether you're transitioning to voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) technology, upgrading to a new high-speed wireless data communication network, or simply changing cell phone service carriers, ensuring that you've got the right service support and user training in place after the sale can make the difference between a successful telecom implementation and one that gives the organization a lingering black eye.

KNOW YOUR SERVICE OPTIONS

It's easy to forget service and training issues while you're focused on purchasing or deploying new telecommunications technology. And even when you prioritize those issues, sorting out the levels of network or end-user service support available through increasingly merged telecommunications companies—and the proliferating number of agents and partners that represent them—requires some doing.

National voice or data carriers and Internet service providers typically offer service level agreements (SLAs) that detail the vendor's responsibilities in the event of network failure, commit them to specific response times for customer problems, and cover other areas of post-sale support. But most wireless and telecom companies don't offer SLAs, which tend to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

That's why it's important to ask questions at the point of sale about what level of customer service you can expect after implementation. LaVon Dennistoun, vice president of customer operations at Integra Telecom, a telecommunications provider in Bloomington, suggests that you ask service providers about who will be available to answer service-related questions after the sale, how easy it will be to reach them, and what levels of technical or service expertise the company possesses, along with other important questions. If training is available, what will it cost? Dennistoun also suggests getting a sample of a monthly bill to assess how easy it is to read or understand. The point is to get these questions answered before products or services are in place.

Finding out how telecom providers track their service quality is another way to screen vendors. Integra, for example, measures more than 30 facets of its customer service performance and sends report cards to customers twice a year. Measured factors include how fast Integra responds to customer calls, how often customers are able to reach a person rather than a recording, and the percentage of calls answered in local markets. "We believe we have to consistently 'inspect what we expect,'" Dennistoun says.

Telecom consultants say the growth of multipurpose communication devices and the convergence of voice, data, and video onto single delivery networks also makes it essential that businesses make it clear whom employees should contact in case of service issues, whether that support comes from in house or an outside source.

"You have a device that looks like a phone but is being used primarily for sending data like e-mail or text messages," says Gerry Hansen, vice president of N'compass, a Minneapolis-based telecom consulting company. "So which direction does that support call go now if there's a problem?"

The more due diligence you do up front to ensure the right technology fit for your company, the lower the odds of system reliability or compatibility issues plaguing you after implementation. When it comes to complex telecom rollouts, Hansen suggests asking vendors to test system features or functions in lab settings. Such "prove-it" testing is especially important if you wish to integrate new hardware or software into existing telecom systems.

"In call-center environments, you may have to integrate new technology with legacy back-end or analog systems, and the latter can be problematic because each manufacturer supports analog gateways in a different way," Hansen says. "There are plenty of 'gotchas' there that companies can overlook if there isn't enough rigor in their evaluations."

MAKING LOCAL CALLS

If you've purchased equipment or services through local agents or distributors of national providers, you'll also want to determine what level of service they'll provide after the sale. While few locals can match the in-house technical expertise of the big boys, middlemen often can tap into the resources of a Cisco, Avaya, or Verizon.

At a minimum, you should expect local affiliates to serve as your advocate in the event of product or service problems, says Mark Jenkins, director of technical solutions for Select Communications, a distributor of wireless services in Plymouth. "If I call the Black-Berry manufacturer directly, I might be able to take care of an issue in 5 or 10 minutes," Jenkins notes. "Whereas a customer who hasn't been through the maze before may not know the right questions to ask, or which level of technical support is equipped to handle what issues." It's not realistic to think a distributor will function as your 24/7 help desk, but Jenkins believes that it should stand ready to aid your cause.

John Beesley, director of network solutions for CA Communications, a telecom service and support company in Minnetonka, says national equipment manufacturers and carriers have worked harder in recent years to draw a "tighter connection" between themselves and end users. Beesley adds that the Twin Cities has benefited by the growth of smaller interconnect and agent companies. These firms tend to provide more hands-on service support than the larger companies that dominated the market 10 years ago, Beesley says: "It's not unusual to call one of these companies and get connected with the CEO, who also may be the company's lead technician and sales guy."

TECHNOLOGY: THE EASY PART

While the technical challenges of installing and integrating new telecom systems with old ones can be daunting, they often pale in comparison to the cultural and process issues that arise when staff must change old ways of working. New methods for retrieving voice or e-mail messages, transferring or forwarding phone calls, accessing the Internet, or conducting video conferences can cause employees to struggle with or resist change.

A new phone system, for example, may significantly alter a receptionist's job by enabling more calls to be routed directly to extensions or queued for the first available person in specific departments. The new features free up more of the receptionist's time, but how will he or she react to being assigned other work? Ditto for call-center service representatives who may resist the shift to "point and click" call handling via computer as VOIP systems displace old-school PBX networks. (VOIP sends voice traffic through data networks instead of traditional phone lines.)

Others may feel new technology represents a direct threat to their livelihoods. VOIP systems, for example, may make members of separate voice and data technical-support teams nervous for fear their groups will be merged—and jobs lost—as networks converge or they are expected to develop new expertise. Explaining the rationale behind technology changes, and seeking input about user requirements before implementation, can help reduce resistance and build goodwill in the ranks.

Gerry Hansen, N'compass

"You need to have conversations with all functions affected by the change, not just those in the IT group, about how their daily work or responsibilities may change as a result of the new technology," Beesley says. Demonstrating how new features or functions will boost productivity and make employees' work easier can also win converts. When call-center representatives see that a VOIP system's "screen pops" allow them to pull up customer account information during incoming calls, for example, they can see the new technology in a more positive light.

Hansen of N'compass says it's also essential that executives are sold not only on the business benefits of new telecom technologies but on their ease of use, too. "If there's even one influential executive who doesn't like the way he or she has to access voice or e-mail with the new system, it can put a damper on the whole project," he says.

DON'T OVERLOOK TRAINING

There's a tendency to think that people will just pick up what they need to know about the new technology's features by thumbing through a manual. But Paul Thibeau, a former marketing communications consultant with Organizational Concepts International, a Minneapolis business consulting firm, observes that "the person controlling the purse strings isn't the one who has to sit at the receptionist's console or in the call center."

Not everyone learns best with a manual, says Thibeau, so it's important to ask manufacturers, carriers or agents what other training resources are available for employees. While classes can help, information delivered just once usually has little staying power. Web sites with comprehensive FAQs, on-the-job aids, such as laminated checklists or "how to" process steps, and online training modules can help people access instruction at the moment of learning need.

"What happens more than companies care to admit is they install a new telecommunications system and don't end up fully using all of its capabilities or features because of training issues," Thibeau says. "So the question becomes, 'Why give people these enhanced phones or data devices if they will never be taught how to use them?'" ■

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