



# **10 Things to Look For in a Communications System Support Provider**

**An Enterprise Briefing Paper**

**February 2010**

Increasing market velocity, heightened competitive pressures and a tightened economy are driving organizations to rely on their communications systems more than ever to conduct business, stay in touch with customers and constituents, and achieve their strategic objectives.

The urgency to maintain uninterrupted communications, coupled with the growing complexity of today's systems, makes it more critical than ever to have robust support capabilities at the ready to continuously monitor system performance and rapidly identify and resolve any issues that arise.

Increasingly, businesses are viewing their approach to system support as a strategic decision that requires careful evaluation. There's little debate that the stakes are high: communications downtime can easily lead to dissatisfied customers, lost revenue and damage to the company brand.

Many of our enterprise clients have taken a hard look at their approach to support. For those that decided to engage the support of an external maintenance provider, we've distilled their candid "lessons learned" into ten provider capabilities to that can make the difference between mediocre and superior system support.

Don't presume that all maintenance providers have these capabilities or can fulfill them equally well. Whether you are in the market for a first-time support contract, or are considering a change of support providers, don't hesitate to ask the tough questions. The answers you receive will shed considerable light on what you are really getting for your maintenance dollar, and how well protected your vital business communications actually are.

### **Key Capability #1**

#### ***Continuous monitoring for converged networks to ensure high throughput and quality of service***

Converged IP networks have ushered in an era of powerful user applications by moving voice and data over a common network infrastructure. Issues with converged networks demand immediate intervention – not only can telephone service be interrupted, but all other types of non-voice communications can be impacted as well.

If your business utilizes an integrated voice and data infrastructure, you need a support provider that has the specialized skills and tools to continuously monitor a converged network, as well as immediately identify any performance issues and take corrective action.

Questions to ask your prospective support provider:

- Are they able to identify – *and correct* -- network problems that occur beyond the voice server?
- Have them explain exactly how they go about ensuring that voice quality and network throughput remain in the peak performance zone. What tools do they use to detect, diagnose and resolve a converged network problem?

### **Key Capability #2**

#### ***The ability to perform trouble correlation across complex multi-vendor networks***

In the past, businesses typically had straightforward telephone infrastructures that were provided by a single vendor. Today, it is common for companies to utilize hardware and software applications from multiple vendors in more complex architectures that typically involve mobile end user access and higher requirements for network security. These are environments that demand high levels of support provider expertise and experience.

As applications such as unified communications and communication-enabled business processes are broadly adopted by end users throughout the enterprise, it is important that your support provider be able to pinpoint problems regardless of where they occur in the network. Look for providers that have the tools and technical skills to perform sophisticated alarm correlation in complex, multi-vendor environments.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- Have them explain how they perform trouble isolation in complex networks. To what degree can they perform correlation between multiple alarms to rapidly identify a problem?
- Ask them about the resources that would provide support to your business – *how many have industry certifications and multi-vendor skills?*

### **Key Capability #3**

#### ***Proactive monitoring and automated problem resolution***

Most businesses need their communications capabilities to be available around the clock. That means any system alarm has to be immediately checked and quickly resolved, regardless of time of day. Given the importance of rapid response and intervention, look for support providers that have automated, proactive monitoring and resolution capabilities. Some of these automated systems have evolved to the point that well over 90% of troubles are resolved with no human intervention.

Another key attribute to look for is whether the provider's monitoring tools are sufficiently intelligent to actually identify potential problems *before* they occur. Also look to see whether the provider supplies management reports that identify ways to keep problems from recurring.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- What tools do they utilize for system monitoring, alarm correlation, diagnostics, automated repair and reporting?
- Are their tools capable of resolving issues proactively, or is human intervention always required?
- How do they alert customers when there is an alarm? How about when the alarm is resolved?

### **Key Capability #4**

#### ***Priority response you can depend on***

Although many trouble conditions can be resolved remotely, some situations require on-site intervention to restore network or system performance. Make sure that the prospective service provider is equipped to provide priority service when onsite response is required – both during the business day as well as outside of normal hours.

Look for providers that have an extensive network of technicians and field engineers who are able to provide support within an agreed-upon interval. The most responsive providers will often commit to be onsite within two or four hours.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- What local resources are readily available to handle problems?
- How quickly can they respond to an outage or disaster recovery situation?
- Is out-of-hours support covered under the standard contract, or is it subject to additional charges?

**Key Capability #5**  
***Comprehensive support with no hidden charges***

If your business is like many others, your support budget is fixed, and perhaps even shrinking. A comprehensive support agreement can go a long way to eliminate unexpected expense while minimizing business risk.

Without comprehensive coverage, your business can be at risk of expensive and unpredictable time and materials charges. Many suppliers offer rudimentary “break/fix” maintenance that is heavily reactive in nature and inadequate for the majority of businesses with critical uptime needs. Also give serious consideration to including spare parts – another source of unexpected cost -- as part of your support agreement.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- Ask the provider to clearly specify the types of support that are included in their maintenance contracts, and those support activities that require additional cost.
- Do their maintenance agreements include replacement parts and the labor to install them?
- How do they handle their parts inventory? Do they have a national distribution system that ensures correct parts are available in the shortest possible interval?

**Key Capability #6**  
***Self-service tools that put more control in your hands***

System configuration errors can be a major source of alarms and reduced network performance. Some providers give their customers access to web-based tools that can help internal IT teams identify potential system problems.

The more advanced of these tools are able to scan hundreds of system settings and compare them to the manufacturer’s recommended configuration. If the system is found to deviate from recommended values, some of these tools can produce easy-to-understand reports that can help your team make the necessary changes themselves to improve system reliability and performance.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- What tools does the provider make available that can benefit your internal IT team?
- Ask about the specific capabilities of these tools. For instance, do they offer tools that can proactively audit what versions of software and firmware are installed on the system and provide alerts when new releases are available?

**Key Capability #7**  
***Access to original software and firmware***

Service packs, software patches and security updates are essential to maintaining system reliability and availability. For most manufacturers, genuine software and firmware is only available from authorized support providers that have met certain training and certification standards. Beware of providers that are not authorized by the manufacturer they claim to represent. When in doubt, check with your system manufacturer.

Although many software releases are able to be installed by the customer, some require involvement of the support provider. You may want to consider a service provider that not only alerts you when new

releases are available, but can also provide installation support at a time that is convenient to your business.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- Do they have legitimate access to the manufacturer's original and authentic software and firmware? Check the provider's website for indications that they are authorized by your system vendor.
- Have the provider explain what alerting and installation services they offer for software and firmware, and what extra charges apply.

### **Key Capability #8**

#### ***Availability of on-site technical support when you need it***

Even those businesses with in-house IT groups need specialized expertise from time to time. Make sure that the prospective provider is able to provide on-site support – both for trouble resolution requiring on-site intervention, as well as situations when some IT augmentation is required.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- Do they have their own certified technicians that can be dispatched on a 24x7 basis when the need arises?
- How quickly are those technicians able to respond?

### **Key Capability #9**

#### ***Competent and responsive help desk support***

Few situations are more frustrating than having a technical need and being unable to reach your support provider. Make sure that your prospective partner has a 24x7 helpdesk that is staffed by trained and competent resources.

If your business operates in multiple countries or time zones, give strong consideration to a service provider that has international reach and provides "follow the sun" coverage that ensures continuity of problem resolution if multiple engineers or operation centers become involved.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- Is their help desk always open around the clock and staffed with trained technicians?
- In what countries – and languages -- do they provide help desk support?

### **Key Capability #10**

#### ***Easy online access to a knowledge database***

The practical value of a support provider is largely a function of its collective experience and expertise. Look for providers that readily share their knowledge and tips. The better providers maintain extensive knowledge databases and provide access to their customers.

Join an on-line discussion forum that is focused on the equipment that you want to have maintained. Ask other end-users about the support providers you are considering. Peer input will help you get a strong sense of the effectiveness and responsiveness of different providers.

Questions for your prospective support provider:

- What knowledge databases do they make available to customers?
- Do they offer facilitated on-line user forums? Are there customer-led discussion groups that they can recommend?

Whether basic or highly sophisticated, all communications systems need a watchful eye. When problems arise, it is crucial that your service provider be properly equipped to quickly restore your communications system to its full function.

Unfortunately, all support providers are not equally capable of keeping your system operating at peak performance. By evaluating your potential providers according to these 10 capabilities, you will be well on your way to selecting a support partner that will help you realize the full return on your communications assets while maintaining continuous uninterrupted communications.

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