

Critical Factors for your Communications Solution

Cormac Reid - Managing Director - Comms-Online - provides some key pointers

The last thing you want when your company needs to evaluate and improve its communications is to be confused by acronyms and jargon. This article offers you a concise guide to the strategic factors involved in choosing a communications solution that need to be considered. They are as follows:

- Outsource expertise – don't assume in-house knowledge
- Devise a schematic model for your business, both current and future looking
- Assess your existing technology
- Assess your options in the carrier market.
- Plan your project with professional aid - a critical success factor
- Future-proof the technology you choose
- Invest in security – mission critical to your business
- Proactively update your Anti-Virus.
- Manage your traffic and prioritise Internet usage
- Buy quality infrastructure - you'll save in the end

Being an IT manager in either an SME or a larger corporate entity, the decisions you make will affect the functioning of your organisation now and well into the future. You may need a high degree of outside expertise to help you establish, clarify and focus on your communications needs in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

As a first step to choosing a communications solution which will go hand in glove with your company's requirements is building a relationship with a communications consultant who can independently assist you establish a solution to match the objectives of the business model for your company. This is essentially a roadmap of where the company came from, where it is now and where it is going. Once this is in place, the next stage is to devise a way of delivering that model through investment in technology and value added carrier services.

An IT manager's expertise and understanding of the business will be vital here: you will be able to design and guide the planning of the solution in all its various aspects. The task is to match the correct communications



infrastructure to your company's needs, whether it is a local area network (LAN) you need or communication between various sites (WAN). Then again you might need to make the most of your Internet technology, or teleworking and home office set-up for your staff.

Once your needs have been identified, examine any existing technology. It doesn't always have to be dumped - far from it. But it can be moved to secondary locations so that room can be made for new equipment, if that's what is needed. Either way, an examination by your comms company of what is in place is a good start. Identify the new and in some cases redundant circuits and have an inventory of your comms room carried out.

Next, it is time to plan your project. At this vital point, you will need to verbalise exactly what is expected from any new infrastructure. Specify where you want it to take the company, and the benefits you want from it. When designing a solution, one of the key elements to build into it is future proofing. This is simply designing it with the right technology from the outset so that you don't reach a point two years away where you are unable to expand, extend, add-on or benefit from later innovation.

Once the new solution has been chosen, a number of features must be prioritised. Security is the first of these. Invest money in buying good

security for the protection of your office and business, preferably a system that allows you to know how many internal and external connections you have, who has access to them and what level of access each person has. Some 80 per cent of all hacking is done internally, some of it unintentional but nevertheless damaging.

Related to this is your anti-virus protection. Comms-Online have seen the damage which some viruses have done. Don't let it happen to you! We believe that security from hacking and viruses is one of most important points to have covered in any new communications solution. Aim to stop viruses getting in at all points, both internally and externally.

Another important feature that must be built into your solution is traffic management. When deploying a WAN for an organisation, add in extra policies so you can know what is happening on it. If Internet access is slowed down because some employees are using it to find out the football results, then you need to know this. Often companies jump to the conclusion that they need to increase bandwidth in order to speed up Internet access. This is costly and can be unnecessary. What is needed is software that allows you prioritise Internet usage among users, so that important tasks are ranked ahead of the others. There are a lot of packages on the market to help solve this problem. But note that they vary in quality a great deal. Get independent advice on solving this problem, as different carriers will offer different solutions.

As a general rule it is advisable to buy quality infrastructure whenever you can and to go with the industry standard in whatever area you happen to be involved in. Choosing non-standard equipment and software might save you money in the short term but you'll find that the money you'll spend on support services afterwards tends to outweigh initial cost savings. Remember that infrastructure is not an overhead; it is a business decision and investment. Decide on reliability and then purchase it. If you need to make an argument to your Board as to why this should be so, simply calculate what downtime will cost the company. Can you afford to be down for 2-3 days?