

BEST BETS FOR AN EFFECTIVE VOIP ROLLOUT

By **Micah** Singer

As VoIP and the service revenue model become clearer, more and more providers of all types will launch their own offerings and/or integrate the new technology into their respective service suites. Even now, many aspiring VoIP service providers are either at the discussion, planning or testing stage or are adding a double or triple play to an existing offering.

In some cases, these companies already have performed trials or even invested hard cost into a VoIP system that has not provided return. With that in mind, here we attempt to describe some of the challenges inherent in a VoIP deployment and offer suggestions and insight into how to meet these challenges head-on with smart, effective solutions.

Whether you are purchasing the VoIP infrastructure on which your service will run or using a reseller or an outsourced solution, your revenue will rely 100 percent on it. Your infrastructure is the sports equivalent of your goalie – it keeps you in the game.

Many outsourced solutions and resellers have opted to use a “best of breed” approach – aggregating all of the various components of hardware and software that have been tested for stability and scalability, and are generally used in larger deployments. Understanding the predictability of the components that will run your service offering is crucial.

Another approach taken by some reseller and outsource programs is to develop custom components through SIP development or leveraging open source. There is a risk/reward evaluation for selecting any infrastructure selection approach: best of breed (reward: tested, scalable, modular; risk: more expensive); open source (reward: free, large developer community; risk: poor documentation, not scale tested); homegrown (reward: leverage-able; risk: no support organization, costly to maintain); or one-stop shopping (reward: single source for resolution; risk: costly, slower upgrades, less-focused development organization).

Whether an outsourced solution or a reseller program, there are five important areas of consideration when creating a VoIP service: finding the right people, choosing reliable partners for origination and termination, easy provisioning with excellent self-care portals, accurate billing and good reporting.

As always, your human resources are your most valuable assets. You need the right combination of in-source and outsource expertise and varied backgrounds and skill sets on your VoIP deployment and support team, including:

- Voice routing quality of service management: engineer
- Local area network qualification/troubleshooting: engineer
- System integration/management team: developer
- Billing management
- Online portal(s) management: engineer
- Sysadmin—general system administration tasks: engineer
- CPE testing and troubleshooting: engineer
- Basic call-flow troubleshooting and configuration on all systems
- Vendor support contacts and contacts for bug relief and deep knowledge of systems
- Remote hands

Generally, the more control an outsourced solution provides, the more engineering knowledge required in-house. As a rule of thumb, any approach to a launch should include some dedicated engineering resource. One or more internal individuals with responsibility and basic call-flow troubleshooting and configuration knowledge make the reseller or outsourced solution model work much more smoothly.

Secondly, selecting the correct IP network can be tricky. Most consumers and businesses understand that the public Internet is not as reliable as traditional phone service but will (for the most part) tolerate inconvenience for savings. If not, then some form of a managed network is required. Obviously, the guarantee of quality is more important to enterprise customers who represent the larger economic opportunity.

Important to note is that most reseller programs do not allow service providers to make this selection while some outsourced solutions providers do and some do not. Think hard about how much control you need to be successful in your VoIP offer and select a provider that meets these requirements.

Thirdly, VoIP adopters are inherently Web savvy and expect online support and access to a wealth of controls for self-management. You need to think carefully through all of the actors in your VoIP offering—end users, customer telecom managers, agents, resellers, your customer service reps and your management—and make sure you select tools that can be configured for as many actors as possible and allow flexibility for the future. Reseller programs tend to have online tools that are solid and inflexible—hence speed and ease of deployment.

Outsourced solutions provide a range of options for Web integration. Because the Web is the most important place you will interact with your customers, it is also crucial that you select a flexible front end solution that can support your need to differentiate from competitors. Some outsourced solutions providers have invested in OSS/BSS systems as another best of breed component, while others have developed the various Web portals and systems that can support this flexibility. In both cases professional services are usually required as your RFP becomes more complex.

Next, monitoring and reporting requirements grow exponentially as your call volume grows. Assessment for fraud, accounting integration and internal management reporting are all business support systems reporting requirements; call quality, call anomaly, call duration and a myriad of engineering reports are all operations support system requirements. Varying degrees of technical information will be available depending on how involved a reseller or outsourced solution program allows you to be in the engineering. In both cases business reports and the ability to define business reports is crucial.

Lastly, billing a new service offering is complex. There are myriad issues around plan logic, taxation, commission management and payment processing

integration, as well as how you deliver the invoice (online, via email with a link, via email with an attachment or via snail mail). This is also the time to think about how you will integrate double and triple plays into a single billing experience and, more broadly, to think about the future and future-proofing. Reseller programs generally boil these options down to a range of choices and are less clear on future-proofing. Outsourced solutions providers will empower you to create a more unique approach to how you bill and invoice your customer, though often with a cost in rapidity of deployment and professional services.

Generally, a great place to start is to construct a project plan of the core tasks you need to accomplish to get from drawing board to launch. You should expect a reseller to be able to launch you in three to 30 days, once you have provided all relevant information, and an outsourced solutions provider in one to three months, once you have designated your configurations and have been sufficiently trained.

Most of all, find an outsourced solution provider or a reseller program that treats you like a partner, as you will definitely rely on these vendors for support. VoIP is still a young market with many twists and turns ahead. □

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