

WHITE PAPER

Providing Successful Management of Communications Solutions

Author: Phil Edholm

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Introduction

Communications systems in many organizations continue to evolve. For some organizations, maintaining and operating a traditional telephony infrastructure is the primary challenge, while others are migrating to new vendors or incorporating advanced collaboration and Unified Communications capabilities into their solutions.

Regardless of where an organization is on this transformational journey, the challenge of maintaining and operating the solution in a cost effective and operationally sound methodology remains. In fact, for many organizations, the addition of new capabilities and/or new vendors is an exponential increase in complexity and challenge, often at the same time that budgets and internal resources are challenged due to economic and competitive pressures.

This UCStrategies White Paper investigates the use of an external vendor unaligned Managed Services Provider as the primary service entity for the operational and maintenance services of advanced communications systems. The White Paper addresses the options and key benefits of using the resources of Managed Services organizations.

Note from the Author

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Providing Successful Management of Communications Solutions

Communications systems in many organizations continue to evolve. For some organizations, maintaining and operating a traditional telephony infrastructure is the primary challenge, while others are migrating to new vendors or incorporating advanced collaboration and unified communications capabilities into their solutions. Regardless of where an organization is on this transformational journey, the challenge of maintaining and operating the solution in a cost-effective and operationally sound methodology remains.

For many organizations, in fact, the addition of new capabilities and/or new vendors is an exponential increase in complexity and challenges, often at the same time that budgets and internal resources are challenged due to economic and competitive pressures.

After a solution has been purchased and installed, there are a range of activities required to update, maintain, and operate the system. Product support, including software updates, bug fixes, and more, are typically provided by the solution vendor as they are uniquely capable of delivering those items. The other range of services, hardware repair, break/fix, Moves Adds and Changes (MAC), planning, administration, and more, can be provided in a number of ways.

A new option for communications services has emerged that is becoming the preferred choice.

Traditionally, organizations have had three primary options to maintain and operate their communications solutions:

- **Internal Staff**—For some organizations (often larger organizations with significant deployed personnel) having an internal staff with the capabilities to manage the system has been an option.
- **Vendor Channel Partner**—Virtually all of the channels that sell the communications vendor's solutions also provide services for those solutions.
- **Vendor Service**—Some vendors (particularly Avaya) have a services business for their products.

Many organizations are finding that all three of these solutions have disadvantages. Using internal staff can be expensive and leads to spotty coverage and support; the channels are typically limited in their range of services; and vendors are often both expensive and limited to only that vendor's products.

However, a new option for communications services has emerged that is becoming the preferred choice for a rapidly growing set of end customers. That is a specialized Communications Managed Services Provider.

A Managed Services Provider (MSP) is vendor-independent and is not focused on selling product, but rather the optimized operation and maintenance of a communications and collaboration deployment. Continuant is a major provider of Communications Managed Services and this white paper reflects the values that this path has provided to their customers and clients.

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The Big Four: Advantages of a Managed Services Provider

The key focus of a Managed Services Provider (MSP) is the outcomes generated from the operations and management of the overall solution. The goal of the MSP is to assure that the outcomes meet the goals and standards of their customers. To accomplish this, an MSP brings four key elements together that are generally unavailable in the other three options available:

High Performance through On-Demand Resources

The MSP, depending on size and maturity, has a pool of available resources that can respond with a capacity that is generally unavailable in other service options. An MSP like Continuant services hundreds of customers. As a result, they have the resource capacity to focus a large set of resources on the task of management transition or other activities that are highly resource intensive. This focus assures that these tasks are accomplished quickly and with accuracy.

For example, Glen Boodram, Operations Manager at Shriners Hospitals for Children, which operates 24 hospitals across North America, said "Continuant provides the on-demand resources we need. Without their services we would need three or more additional headcount in our core team to provide the level of service required in a critical care healthcare facility group."

A key advantage of an MSP is the ability to marshal the resources needed for key activities and to have those resources available 24/7/365.

Better Outcomes through Defined Processes

MSPs have the resources and breadth to define processes for both response to critical situations and managing change and transition actions. By having the team in place to both define and document/implement processes, as well as having a structured team to follow and use those processes, the overall activities and outcomes of any action are better defined, optimized, predictable, and scalable. The result is a significant reduction in average outage or response times.

Tom Sigler, IT Operations Manager for Multiquip, a diverse manufacturer and supplier of world class quality industrial products and solutions, said, "the biggest advantage of Continuant is their responsiveness; they are an extension of our help desk and team and their processes are integrated with us to provide world class support."

Fixing the Problem through Concentrated Resources

Supporting modern communications systems, running over the IP infrastructure, operating in the data center with virtualization, a range of endpoints, implementing security, and integration with a range of other IT systems requires a formidable range of skills and knowledge. For all but the very largest organizations, the ability to have this range of skills and knowledge on staff is impossible. However, an MSP can have the resources needed based on their breadth of clients. Multiquip's Sigler said, "If I did not have the resources at Continuant available, I would have to have both a security and utilization expert on staff, even though I would only use 10-20% of their time for that specific purpose."

Not only is it expensive to hire these specialized resources, it is often impossible to attract the right knowledge and expertise to a role where it is a fraction of the actual job. An MSP like Continuant has a full range of experts on their staff that are available to assure these complicated and very specific talent needs are met.

Leverage Access to Top Tools

Managing and operating the next generation of communications systems requires a full range of tools. From tools like the Business Communications Operations Management (BCOM) that facilitate the operational configuration of the system based on business processes to tools that perform monitoring, diagnostics, and assurance, the range of requirements is potentially large. Not only do these tools need to be acquired, there is often significant training to optimize their use as well as integration to the specific vendor platforms at any given site.

The MSP can leverage the range of deployments they manage and operate to both deploy and use these tools fully. This gives the MSP team, combined with the customer team, the tools needed to respond and resolve issues quickly--and to minimize repeated events through optimization of the full range of communications components and support systems.

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Delivering Better Outcomes

The key value of engaging an MSP as part of the overall support process is assuring that there are better outcomes. While an MSP may not be involved in the original system purchase and install, using an MSP for the ongoing operations and support can dramatically enhance adoption, and reduce outage time and impact.

For example, Mr. Sigler has used Continuant as a critical component of delivering advanced communications services for over four years: "Continuant helped assure we were able to deploy Microsoft Lync adjacent to our Cisco deployment. They have also managed the transition to Skype for Business as well as major changes in our networking services and call flows. The expertise and resources that Continuant brought to our team were critical to success in the major changes we have been through."

At a typical Shriners hospital, the local IT staff does not have a dedicated communications expert. Instead, the hospital relies on generalists for local support, backed by Continuant experts, typically through remote communications, but on-site if required. According to Mr. Boodram, "Continuant has been a great partner with the right expertise to assure that our local team can solve issues quickly. As a critical care facility, maintaining the systems in operational status and minimizing any impacts are critical. We invested in local call processing for reliability and Continuant enables us to realize the high level of service our users require."

Delivering the best possible outcome, whether for an outage, an upgrade, a vendor transition, or the deployment of new and advanced services, requires a concentration of skills and knowledge, resource scalability, defined processes, planning, and tools that are often beyond the capability of either internal organizations, typical channels, or even vendors. As

the MSP may be providing similar services to literally hundreds of similar activities across the MSP's range of customers, the MSP team is in a unique position to assure that the best possible outcomes occur every time.

Managing the Risk-Cost Challenge

For many organizations the challenge of managing cost versus risk is a problematic decision. If the organization scales to assure that the team is prepared for all potential challenges, the cost of managing and operating the team can become overwhelming. In recent surveys, organizations like Nemertes have concluded that more than 50% of the cost of typical Unified Communications (UC) deployments are maintenance and administration staff. On the other hand, Gartner has said that up to 30% of UC outages are due to operator errors. When an outage or issue occurs, having the right staff and tools available to analyze and mitigate/repair the issues is critical to maintaining and delivering the service organizations expect and are often required for general operations.

The result is that, increasingly, the IT team is caught in an operational conflict. One option is to bring on all of the necessary staff and resources to assure that the team is totally prepared for any potential challenge, despite the fact that this solution requires dramatically increased budgets and headcounts. The alternative is to lack preparation and hope that a major (or even minor) event does not occur. However, the ever-increasing complexity and inter-dependence of our modern communications system virtually guarantees that issues and outages will occur. For many organizations, a 4-hour, or even 2-hour, outage can have significant business and financial impacts.

Engaging an MSP is one of the best ways to mitigate these challenges. The MSP enables a cost-effective way to have a highly skilled, knowledgeable, and scalable resource pool available without having to pay the price when the capability is not required. As part of an MSP relationship, customer access to these critical resources can be “on-demand” for needed situations. For example, Mr. Boodram sees, “the monitoring that Continuant provides is critical for rapid resolution of issues in the Shriners hospitals. We have much more rapid response through Continuant.”

For many organizations, the cost of maintaining on-staff expertise and 24/7 capabilities would cost much more than the cost of an MSP engagement. Mr. Sigler says, “Our Continuant Customer Relationship Manager is a virtual employee who has become an extension of our team. He has the process in place to access the resources needed for any event.”

Single Responsible Team

A consequence of the evolution of communications systems from the closed proprietary solutions of the past to today’s advanced solutions is a dramatic increase in the number of components, often provided under separate contractual relationships.

Many organizations have separate relationships with many vendors:

- Carrier services
- Core communications platform
- Data network
- End points
- UC components (Messaging, Web conferencing, etc.)
- MPLS network
- Server hardware
- SIP trunking
- Session border controllers

The MSP enables a cost-effective way to have a highly skilled, knowledgeable, and scalable resource pool available without having to pay the price when the capability is not required.

- Support contracts (SMARTnet, etc.)
- TDM trunking
- Third-party applications and subscriptions
- Virtualization solution

The result is that resolving the actual issues in an event is challenging. Often the response of a vendor is to point to an adjacent interfacing vendor and place the blame there. A key advantage of an MSP is that the MSP is committed to being the single point of resolution. As the MSP has the range of skills and tools to analyze a problem and quickly determine the root cause or causes, the MSP takes responsibility. As Mr. Sigler says, “having a ‘single throat to choke’ is critical in a response situation. Continuant provides us with a single point that will resolve and mitigate/repair the issues. My team does not have to try to be the arbiter in these complex situations.”

In fact, multiple Continuant customers have said that having a team with the capability to solve the issue and the accountability to see the process through is a critical value to their organizations. An effective MSP has the tools, skills, and accountability to eliminate the challenging issues of problem isolation and attribution. For an over-worked, under-resourced IT organization, having someone to call who takes responsibility for complete resolution is essential for both business continuity and IT team morale.

MSP Use Case Examples

Retaining an MSP as a critical part of managing and operating a communications solution should be considered by virtually any organization. However, there are some specific advantages that an MSP can provide.

Managing the Cost of Legacy Maintenance

The increasing cost of maintenance on traditional telephony systems continues to be a challenge for many organizations. Vendors often see their installed base as being indifferent to significant price increases, resulting in ever-increasing costs. Many organizations are looking to “sweat the asset” of a traditional telephony system. For a large percentage of the installed telephony systems, the system owners have decided that the current telephony system meets their needs and that they are not prepared to invest in advanced UC type services.

Coupled with the current economic climate, this causes many organizations to seek solutions that will maintain operations and availability, but reduce operating costs. For owners of systems like Nortel that are no longer supported or older systems from Avaya and others, this is becoming an increasing challenge. When vendors announce that systems are at end of manufacturer support, service levels diminish and parts availability is often no longer guaranteed.

An MSP can swiftly guide customers through the challenges to assure that the new system meets needs and operational goals.

The MSP can provide the services necessary to maintain and operate these systems, typically at a lower price point than the vendors, or even when the vendor moves a platform or version to the dreaded “End of Support” or “End of Life”. For organizations that have a telephony platform and see their current configurations as meeting their current needs, considering an MSP as the primary support organization is a way to significantly reduce costs, while providing superior outcomes as well.

Managing VoIP Transition Deployments

Many organizations are moving from a legacy PBX infrastructure to a new VoIP-based UC deployment. According to Nemertes, over 50% of VoIP deployments are with a new vendor. This poses significant problems, especially for large organizations.

First, the process of transition is a challenge, requiring the ongoing operation of the existing system while installing and transitioning to the new platform. Using an MSP through this process is very helpful.

Secondly, the MSP will continue to provide optimized support for the new system, enabling the internal team to focus on adoption and new capabilities, assuring that the system meets its goals for ROI.

Finally, these new systems often have tools and management capabilities that are significantly different than previous systems. Operations departments generally require further tools and capabilities to manage and operate the adjacent dependencies such as the data network, servers, virtualization software, SIP trunking, etc. An MSP can swiftly guide customers through the challenges to assure that the new system meets needs and operational goals.

Managing New VoIP Deployments

Often the migration to a new communications platform, such as those offered by Cisco or Microsoft, is undertaken without significant long-term planning for support. Both of these platforms have unique challenges inherent to them, both in the complexity of operation as well as the available support options.

For example, while the Cisco channels (often with their roots in data networking) may be good at installing the systems, their ability to support the complexity of the resulting deployment, including integrating into internal resources, is not acceptable. While there are Systems Integrators available for supporting Microsoft solutions, the cost of a System Integrator generally high, resulting in many organizations trying to perform self-support.

For either type of deployment, engaging an MSP can result in significant increases in both service efficiency and user satisfaction, while controlling, and even reducing, overall support costs. Critical advantages include the capability to support all of the new system functions and for the internal team to learn from experts through the process.

Pricing and Cost Factors

The use of an MSP can be optimized to the needs of the specific organization, but generally the costs are less than alternatives or, in some cases, equivalent. However, the key value of using an MSP is the extended team capabilities, defined processes, superior tools and diagnostics, extensive knowledge, and deep vendor relationships.

An MSP team can be the primary support or the MSP can be used as an extension of the existing team, in the manner that the Shriners team uses Continuant.

According to Mr. Boodram, "Continuant works directly with our local site staff to close issues, 70% of which are system issues they help us resolve. Having Continuant allows us to avoid increasing the size of our staff significantly."

The 'Goldilocks Factor': How to Choose the "Just Right" MSP

When choosing an MSP, the key is to get the right balance of size for both skill and responsiveness. To assure that the MSP has the right skills and resources available to deal with the issues of large organizations, multisite deployments, geographic distribution and multi-vendor environments, the MSP needs to have significant scale.

In the process of evaluating a potential MSP, review their team and their resources, how their NOC operates, and how they support customers that are similar to you. While large size carries the potential of an extensive staff, it often comes with a reduction of responsiveness. When considering your MSP choice ask about how you will be supported. Will you have an assigned account manager who is responsible for your satisfaction and issue resolution? Reviewing recommendations from the MSP's existing customers and references is also a critical step.

Just as Goldilocks found the right solution in the middle in her pursuit of a good bed to sleep in, the best MSP is often not too big and not too small. The ideal MSP has the right balance of the resources of a large company and the customer focus of a smaller business. Continuant is a great example of the combination of effective size and relentless customer focus. The results are seen through the loyalty of their customers.

About Phil Edholm

Phil Edholm is the President of PKE Consulting. PKE consults to end users and vendors in the communications and networking markets. Phil Edholm has over 30 years experience in creating innovation and transformation in networking and communications.



In his career, Phil has worked with all of the major vendors and with hundreds of large customers around the world. He is recognized as an industry expert in VoIP, networking for real-time usage, Unified Communications, and business models for technology adoption. Prior to founding PKE Consulting, he was Vice President of Technology Strategy and Innovation for Avaya. In this role, he was responsible for defining vision and strategic technology and the integration of the Nortel product portfolio into Avaya. He was responsible for portfolio architecture, standards activities, and User Experience. Prior to Avaya, he was CTO/CSO for the Nortel Enterprise business for 9 years. At Nortel, he led the development of VoIP solutions and multimedia communications as well as IP transport technology. His background includes extensive LAN and data communications experience, including 13 years with Silicon Valley start-ups.

Phil is recognized as an industry leader and visionary. In 2007, he was recognized by Frost and Sullivan with a Lifetime Achievement Award for Growth, Innovation and Leadership in Telecommunications for creating the VoIP industry. Phil is a widely sought speaker and has been in the VoiceCon/Enterprise Connect Great Debate three times. He has been recognized by the IEEE as the originator of "Edholm's Law of Bandwidth" as published in July 2004 IEEE Spectrum magazine and as one of the "Top 100 Voices of IP Communications" by Internet Telephony magazine. Phil was a member of the IEEE 802.3 standards committee, developed the first multi-protocol network interfaces, and was a founder of the Frame Relay Forum. Phil has 19 patents and holds a BSME/EE from Kettering University.

About UCStrategies

UCStrategies is an industry resource for enterprises, vendors, system integrators, and anyone interested in the growing Unified Communications arena. A supplier of objective information on Unified Communications, UCStrategies is supported by an alliance of leading communication industry Advisors, Analysts, and Consultants who have worked in the various segments of Unified Communications since its inception.



About Continuant

Continuant delivers an industry-leading customer experience, a staff of highly skilled and certified engineers, and superior incident management and resolution. With this foundation, we help improve business communications, processes, and efficiencies by delivering customized service solutions to meet business communications requirements.



Continuant, Inc. 5050 20th Street East, Tacoma, WA 98424
1.800.652.9920 info@continuant.com www.continuant.com