

WHITE PAPER

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

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Introduction

Are you keeping up with the changes taking place in the world of enterprise communications? Or are you among the many who find it challenging—if not downright daunting—to manage the transformation happening in the world of traditional telephony as well as in the brave new world of Unified Communications (UC)? Take heart. You're not alone.

As enterprise communications systems continue to evolve, one constant remains. No matter where your organization falls on this transformational UC journey—whether you're just starting out or whether you are already making decisions about systems—chances are, your number one priority is to maintain and operate a cost-effective and operationally sound solution, one that is right for you and your unique enterprise.

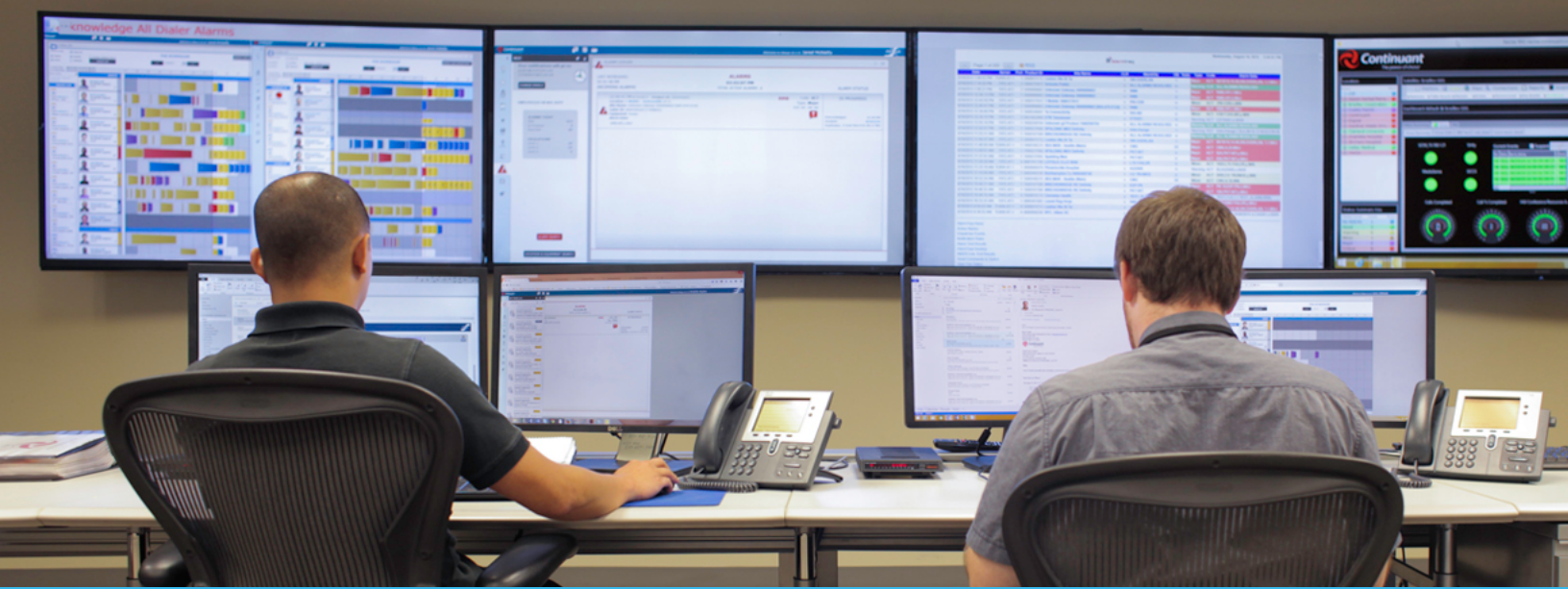
The good news is that a new option for communications services has emerged from the chaos and confusion. This option, fast becoming the preferred choice for a rapidly growing number of organizations, is the emergence of the communications Managed Services Provider, or "MSP."

Why choose an MSP? The reasons are numerous, but for many organizations, the most significant benefit is independence from any particular vendor, also known as vendor independence. This is the ability to select products that work for your particular enterprise. To look at it another way, the MSP's focus is on optimizing the operation and maintenance of a communications and collaboration deployment, rather than on selling you a product or suite of products.

Let's take a look at how one MSP, Continuant, helps companies find the best way to migrate to a UC environment and/or maximize their traditional telephony environment.

This White Paper is attributed to the research and writing of Phil Edholm of PKE Consulting.

This 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. Addressed are the options and key benefits of using the resources of Managed Services organizations.



Best Practices: The Continuant Way

For many organizations, maintaining a traditional telephony infrastructure and/or migrating to new vendors as part of a Unified Communications approach leads to an exponential increase in complexity and challenges—often when budgets and internal resources are lacking because of economic and competitive pressures.

That's where a company like Continuant can help.

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 that vendor is uniquely capable of delivering such services. There are, in addition, a number of ways that a purchaser can gain access to a range of services such as hardware repair, break/fix, Moves Adds and Changes (MAC), planning, administration, and more.

Traditionally, if you wanted to maintain and operate your specific communications solutions, you could choose among these three options:

- **Internal Staff**—Most often, larger organizations will have the option of using internal staff capable of managing the system.
- **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) offer services for their product as a separate business.

For many organizations, however, each of these options has its 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 their own product line.

The Big Four: Advantages of a Managed Services Provider

In contrast, working with a Managed Services Provider offers the enterprise the opportunity to articulate the goals and desired outcome from the operations and management of an overall solution. It's the MSP's job to ensure that that this particular solution meets the goals and standards that the customer sets forth, and that the desired outcome of the customer is met. To accomplish this, the MSP brings together four key elements that the other three options do not offer:

1. High-Performance through On-Demand Resources

The MSP, depending on size and maturity, maintains a pool of available resources that can respond with a capacity that is generally unavailable in other service options. Continuant, for example, services hundreds of customers and has the capacity to focus significant resources on certain tasks such as management transition or other resource-intensive activities. This focus assures that these tasks are accomplished quickly, accurately, and without the customer having to add additional staff.

Case in point: Shriners Hospitals for Children, which operates 24 hospitals across North America. According to Operations Manager, Glen Boodram, "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 working with an MSP, as illustrated in the Shriners Hospitals case, is the fact that the MSP can marshal the resources the customer needs when the customer needs them and to make those resources available 24/7/365.

2. Better Outcomes through Defined Processes

Another advantage of working with an MSP: Well-defined processes. This might seem like a "no-brainer," but when it comes to being able to respond quickly and effectively to critical situations or to manage transition and change as well as effectively oversee the actions that need to be taken to transition from one platform to another, it is vital that the organization have access to the right resources, expertise, and processes—all part of the domain of the MSP.

Because the MSP has the team in place to define, document, and implement processes, as well as having the right structure to use when following those processes, you can expect that the outcomes of any action will not only be better defined and optimized but will also be predictable, scalable, and replicable. Working within such discipline—i.e., that of the MSP—most companies can expect to experience a significant reduction in average outage or response times. Equally important, the MSP adds an element of something that is a bit harder to define: peace of mind.

Here's how Multiquip, a diverse manufacturer and supplier of world-class quality industrial products and solutions, describes its working relationship with Continuant—which, among other services, acts as an extension of the company's Help Desk. Says Tom Sigler, IT Operations Manager for Multiquip, "The biggest advantage of Continuant is their responsiveness; they are an extension of our Help Desk and team and their processes are integrated with ours to provide world-class support."

3. Fixing the Problem through Concentrated Resources

Another way the enterprise can benefit from working with an MSP: having access to the MSP's highly skilled and experienced knowledge workers. It takes experience, a formidable range of skills, and significant knowledge to handle all of the requirements of supporting modern communications systems—running over the IP infrastructure, operating in the data center with virtualization, supporting a range of endpoints, implementing security, and integrating with a range of other IT systems. For all but the very largest organizations, having such a broad range of skills and knowledge on staff is next to impossible. However, based on their breadth of clients, the MSP can indeed retain such staff resources, to the benefit of the customer. As Multiquip's Sigler points out, "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 percent of their time for that specific purpose."

Companies like Multiquip understand that it makes little economic sense to hire highly specialized technical resources whose talents are underutilized. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to attract the right knowledge workers and experts to a position that only

allows them to use that expertise in limited ways. In contrast, an MSP such as Continuant can make such experts available to companies like Multiquip to assure that their complicated and very specific requirements for talent are met when they are needed.

4. Power Tools

Managing and operating the next generation of communications systems requires a full range of tools. From tools such as 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 can be very large. Not only does an organization need to acquire these tools; but often significant training is required in order to optimize both their use and their integration to the specific vendor platforms at any given site.

The MSP can leverage these tools, deploying them as needed in a broad range of situations so that they are fully utilized. 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.

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT



Delivering Better Outcomes

While there are many reasons to engage an MSP, perhaps the most important reason of all is this: You can expect better results and outcomes.

While an MSP may not have been involved in the original system purchase and installation, using an MSP for ongoing operations and support can dramatically enhance adoption and reduce outage time and impact. It's all about the outcome.

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.

For example, Multiquip's Tom Sigler has used Continuant for the past four years as a critical component of delivering advanced communications services: "Continuant helped assure we were able to deploy Microsoft Lync adjacent to our Cisco deployment," he notes. "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."

In similar fashion, Shriners Hospital for Children has found Continuant to be a valuable part of the team for all of its local hospitals. At a typical Shriners hospital, the local IT staff most often relies on generalists for

support; but Continuant experts are always available to them—usually through as remote support, but working on-site if and as required.

The result? In the words of Shriners Hospitals' Glen 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."

***Continuant has been a great partner
with the right expertise to assure that
our local team can solve issues quickly.***

***—Glen Boodram
Shriners Hospitals for Children***

Managing the Risk-Cost Challenge

Managing cost versus risk is a problematic decision for most organizations. By scaling up to assure that the team is prepared for all potential challenges, the organization can be overwhelmed by the cost of managing and operating that team.

Recent surveys bear this out.

In a survey regarding UC deployment staffing costs, Nemertes Research found that at least 50 percent of the cost of the typical UC deployment could

be attributed to maintenance and administrative personnel staffing. In similar fashion, Gartner looked at the costs and sources of UC outages, and found that up to 30 percent of UC outages are due to operator errors—in other words, the high cost of not having the right staff on the job. 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, organizations are finding it a major challenge to properly staff the right IT team. 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; however, this solution requires dramatically increased budgets and headcounts. The alternative is to hope that a major (or even minor) event does not occur.

Wishful thinking, for sure. 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. For certain, it is a cost-effective way to have available a highly skilled, knowledgeable, and scalable resource pool without having to pay the price when you don't need the resource. As part of an MSP relationship, customer access to these critical resources can be "on-demand" when the situation requires. At Shriners Hospitals, for example, Continuant provides monitoring services that are, says Boodram, "critical for rapid resolution of issues in the Shriners Hospitals. We have much more rapid response through Continuant."

For many organizations, the price tag for maintaining on-staff expertise and 24/7 capabilities far exceeds the cost of an MSP engagement. 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

One 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 entered into separate relationships with many vendors—including, but not limited to the following:

- Carrier services
- Core communications platform
- Data network
- End points
- UC components (Messaging, Web Conferencing, etc.)
- MPLS network
- Server hardware
- SIP trunking
- Session border controllers
- Support contracts (i.e., SMARTnet)
- TDM trunking
- Third-party applications and subscriptions
- Virtualization solution

As a result, it becomes very difficult and challenging to resolve the actual issues in an event. Often, in this situation, the vendor may end up pointing the finger of blame on an adjacent interfacing vendor—whether or not it belongs 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 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 reported their organizations value having a knowledgeable, responsive team in place that has the capability to solve the issue and the accountability to see the process through. An effective MSP possesses not only the tools and skills, but is also accountable for eliminating the challenging issues of problem isolation and attribution. For an over-worked, under-resourced IT organization, having someone to call who takes responsibility for total and 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 three specific advantages that an MSP can provide.

1. 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.

This situation, coupled with the current economic climate, causes many organizations to seek solutions that will maintain operations and availability, while also reducing 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.

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.

2. Managing VoIP Transition Deployments

Many organizations are moving from a legacy PBX infrastructure to a new VoIP-based UC deployment. According to Nemertes Research, over 50 percent 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, however, 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 very different from 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.

3. Managing New VoIP Deployments

Too often, when organizations decide to migrate to a new communications platform, such as those offered by Cisco or Microsoft, they do so—unfortunately—without engaging in long-term planning for support of this migration. What many organizations do not realize, both of these platforms have unique and inherent challenges, 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, falls short. Similarly, while there are Systems Integrators available to support Microsoft solutions, the high cost of a Systems Integrator results 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 or, in some cases, equivalent to any alternatives. 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. “Continuant works directly with our local site staff to close issues, 70 percent of which are system issues they help us resolve,” Boodram points out. “Having Continuant allows us to avoid increasing the size of our staff significantly.”



The 'Goldilocks Factor'

So, what do you do when you finally make the decision to engage an MSP? How do you choose one that's right for you?

In our view, 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 with multi-site deployments, significant geographic distribution, and multi-vendor environments, the MSP needs, first and foremost, to have significant scale. In the process of evaluating a potential MSP, review their team and their resources, look closely at how their NOC operates, and find out 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 neither "too big" nor "too small."

For most organizations, the "ideal" MSP will have the right balance of the resources of a large company and the customer focus of a smaller business. As evidenced by the loyalty of their customers, Continuant is a great example of the combination of effective size and relentless customer focus. The choice is yours.

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.



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