

Planning Your Call Center's Migration to VoIP

Don Van Doren and David Powis, Vanguard Communications
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Introduction

IP Telephony and Voice over IP (VoIP) are getting a lot of buzz these days. It's as big a change as the transformation from analog to digital equipment we saw three decades ago. All the switch suppliers are transitioning their underlying architecture from TDM-based (time division multiplexing) to IP-based - circuit switching to packet switching. IP Telephony enables new capabilities or makes some existing capabilities more effective or cheaper. For user companies needing to build new centers, plan for end-of-life migration, or add applications and capabilities, IP can make a lot of sense.

New Opportunities

Let's take a look at some of the trends behind the increase in VoIP implementation within the contact center. Companies face two basic choices in how to approach IP Telephony. One possibility is to simply upgrade existing equipment to be IP-enabled (in Nortel's case, Succession 1000M). This allows a mixed environment, where you can continue to use existing TDM-based phones, IVR, or other endpoints, while deploying new IP-based sets in other areas.

The other is a "green field" approach with an IP-Centric solution (such as the Succession 1000), which makes the internal architecture completely packet-based. Of course, we will continue to interface to external, circuit-based systems through gateways.

In either case, the IP migration can be a catalyst for implementing new capabilities and applications in the contact center, and improve system simplicity and deployment flexibility. Key areas of opportunity and their benefits in the contact center include:

Virtual (multi-site) Architecture - IP solutions can enable true virtual operation in a multi-site deployment. A call can instantly be accessed by any endpoint on the network, eliminating guesses about where to queue a call for the most likely next available agent. IP also eliminates many previous restrictions based on location, whether those were system management or premise-based equipment limitations. IP architecture promotes centralized management, administration, and control. All statistical data, regardless of physical agent location, can be collected and integrated within one central management reporting application. Similarly, adjunct equipment such as Quality Monitoring or Logging systems can be centrally located and managed (rather than locating equipment at each site), reducing overall equipment and support costs.

Disaster Recovery - VoIP provides greater flexibility and options for disaster recovery planning. This includes the ability to set up home-based agents (usually via a broadband connection), and to distribute IP-enabled IVR systems across the Enterprise, providing increased flexibility in the event of an outage in one specific location.

Multi-media and CTI – The trend toward improved CTI capabilities will continue as VoIP standards continue to emerge. While no major multi-media or CTI benefits exist with IP today, new applications will certainly emerge -- especially for multi-site, multimedia environments. Selecting the right IP approach now will make that CTI integration easier and less costly.

Next Steps

So, given all these benefits, how should a company plan their own migration?

First, examine your organization's long-term strategy to determine how IP might enable needed applications or support other business goals. Understand what other capabilities and benefits are available through IP, and evaluate how they might enhance your current operations or future plans. Some examples:

- Do you have (or plan to have) multiple contact center sites? Is there a requirement for remote agents? If so, you might consider IP for such functions as centralized reporting and application deployment (hardware and software).
- If you have just one contact center, consider whether IP could enhance your disaster recovery plans. Also consider prospective operational benefits -- might remote agent (local) capability be a competitive advantage in agent hiring and retention?
- If you use or are considering outsourcing, can you use IP to better manage and control calls sent there?

Second, develop a business case for the particular IP enabled architecture or applications you are planning. Though network costs are traditionally an area of savings, other areas, such as operations, software/hardware, maintenance and support will contribute to your ROI. (Offsetting that will be the data network assessment and upgrade costs that will be required.)

Third, what will be the management and support structure of this new environment? If you have remote locations, understand what those support requirements will be. Do you typically have data networking support during ALL hours of contact center operations? An IP migration can accelerate consolidation of data and voice support organizations. If done well, this can be a great opportunity for both sides to learn and benefit from each other's expertise, rather than foster another turf battle.

Conclusion

Whatever your situation, it's important to plan now for IP. The industry is moving there; most R&D spending is focused on IP solutions. Gartner predicts that by 2007, virtually all phone gear sold will be IP-ready. But there are many options to consider, and the right answer depends on your current situation and where you're trying to go. Take stock, look into the future, and set a course of action. Good success.

Don Van Doren is President and David Powis is a Senior Consultant with Vanguard Communications Corporation, a consulting firm that specializes in contact center processes, operations and technology. For more information go to <http://www.vanguard.net> or call 973-605-8000.

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