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On the Ground with IP Telephony: Vendor and Integrator Selection

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Enterprises selecting an IP Telephony (IPT) solution often focus on the product itself and neglect the vendor and reseller/integrator. Leading product features and functions are generally very comparable for most enterprises. When selecting a solution, focus on the strength of the vendor and the experience and expertise of the integrator.

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Executive Summary

As enterprises make the move to IP Telephony (IPT), they struggle to find the right product, vendor and reseller/integrator mix. The challenge is not usually the features and functions of the product, but the ability to implement and integrate the solution into the existing network infrastructure. The product decision should be equally weighted against the strength of the vendor, existing network architecture, and experience of the integrator. Enterprises selecting an IPT product must consider:

- » If a homogeneous network and IPT solution is necessary or beneficial.
- » The focus and long-term viability of the vendor in the IPT space.
- » The experience and expertise of the reseller/integrator.

Focusing on the product alone will almost certainly result in a botched implementation for all but the most knowledgeable and experienced IT shops.



Selection Point

Selection of an IP Telephony (IPT) solution for enterprise-wide implementation requires careful consideration and comparison shopping. Moreover, the selection decision must take into account how the product will fit with the existing network infrastructure, the viability and roadmap of the vendor, and the experience and knowledge of the integrator. Making a product decision without considering the aforementioned selection criteria is a recipe for disaster.

In the ITA Premium “[IP Telephony Systems](#)” Product Comparison research note, it was noted that, “Feature gaps between leading solutions have largely been closed, so enterprises preparing to invest in IPT must select a vendor that will be able to support long term needs.” The fact is that for most enterprises the selection of the product itself should be secondary to the strength and vision of the vendor, and the knowledge and expertise of the integrator.

Key Selection Criteria

Network Considerations and Vendor Homogeneity

An argument can be made for a homogeneous network and IPT infrastructure. Too often in a heterogeneous environment, one vendor will blame a deficiency or performance problem on the other vendor. For instance, if the existing data network (LAN/WAN) is standardized on Cisco, and an IPT product from another vendor is implemented, there is a fear that when a problem arises, each vendor will point to the other as the source of the issue. In theory, this should not be an issue, but in practice it very often is.

Single Vendor Sourcing

“At the end of the evaluation, we unanimously decided to implement the Cisco telephone system, mainly for technical reasons and because of one-vendor support. We were a little bit concerned about going with voice over IP if Avaya was telling us that there was a demarcation on the network and we were going to push voice and data down the same network. We wanted to avoid [finger pointing between vendors] because we had actually experienced some of that in the past.”

Manager of Information Systems, mid-sized manufacturing firm



In fact, Cisco feeds on the multi-vendor concern with its [Unified Communications](#) branding. In essence, the message is that a Cisco IPT solution will integrate more seamlessly with a Cisco network environment, and vice versa. From a purely technical point of view, Cisco's single vendor pitch is simply hype. A Cisco network should be able to – and can – carry, prioritize, segment, and manage IPT traffic from any product that is based on industry standards such as H.323, SIP, DiffServ, 802.1p, 802.1q, etc. So, whether the IPT product selection is Avaya, Nortel, Shoretel, or any other leading standards based IPT vendor, an up-to-date Cisco network will support the traffic admirably.

Another Single Vendor Story

"I've ended up with the Cisco system. And so now I'm deploying not only the data side, but the voice side with Cisco. And the call center has the Cisco CallManager software. I'm really trying to eliminate the number of vendors I had to deal with."

Director of Information Management Services, large municipal government

Where the single vendor argument carries weight is in the support of the infrastructure. For example, if a problem with call quality is identified, the first call for support is likely to be to the IPT product vendor or integrator. Some troubleshooting will likely take place, and if the cause of the problem cannot be identified, the IPT vendor is likely to point to the network as the cause of the problem. Similarly, when a support call is made to the network vendor to help resolve the problem, they will likely point to the IPT implementation as the culprit.

This finger pointing and back and forth can be eliminated when a single vendor supplies both the network and IPT infrastructure. For this very reason, vendors like Avaya that do not provide best-of-breed networking infrastructure have partnered with vendors like [Extreme Networks](#) in an effort to provide a more homogeneous network and IPT infrastructure, and a single point of contact for the support of both.

Evaluate Vendor Stability and Strategy

When selecting an IPT product, the long-term viability and stability of the vendor are very important. Equally important is the ability and desire of the vendor to invest in R&D and demonstrate a strategy for long-term product competitiveness. This is where large, profitable vendors have a distinct advantage over smaller, less established vendors.



Vendor Reputation

“Well, on the plus side we saw advantages to going with one vendor for an end-to-end solution, for the core network and the VoIP. Cisco had great solid reputation, no problems there.”

Information Systems Manager, mid-sized municipality

For example, Cisco recognized that the market for IPT was going to explode, and dug into their massive war chest to invest huge financial resources into R&D for the products. Similarly, they have their sales and marketing machine firing on all cylinders to get the products widely deployed.

Avaya has taken a slightly different, but equally effective approach. The company focuses entirely on enterprise communications solutions, and their significant resources are dedicated to developing and selling products that enable business communications. Cisco and Avaya are two examples of IPT vendors that will continue to lead the market due to their ongoing investment in product development, sales, and marketing.

Vendor Relationship

“When you have a vendor that you have a good relationship with like we do with Avaya, what we can take advantage of is [the ability to] participate in their user groups and help them, what their product evolution is by providing input and ideas and what we are looking for, where we think the market’s going, and then they choose those types of things and incorporate them.”

VP Technology, large outsource contact centre

On the other side of the coin, vendors like ShoreTel have an excellent product, but do not have the financial resources and brand recognition of leading vendors, and therefore will struggle to gain market share. Similarly, a vendor like Siemens that has clawed back investment in enterprise product development and made a play to sell their enterprise networking division is cause for concern.



A Good Integrator is Critical

In most cases, enterprises will rely strongly on a Value Added Reseller (VAR) and integrator for an IPT implementation. Simply put, the choice of integrator can make or break an IPT deployment. An inexperienced and unskilled integrator can turn the implementation of an excellent product into a complete nightmare. The cost of selecting the wrong integrator can be costly as well, as one client pointed out. An IPT implementation that was supposed to provide a very attractive ROI ended up costing more than the previous Centrex solution due to an inept integrator (see Integrator Nightmare). Conversely, one with the proper training and several successful implementations under their belt can make the deployment a complete success.

Integrator Nightmare

“So from our perspective, our Voice over IP solution has been just a nightmare. The [products], Nortel versus Cisco, are fairly comparable as far as the physical equipment goes. None of our lack of solution has been in the actual equipment.”

“[The integrator] was sending telephone installers to do this install. And these guys had absolutely [no understanding of networks]. I know more about networks than their engineer did. I had to show him how a network works. And as soon as you see that you should put your hands up and say “you guys need to get out of here and bring some people back who are experts.”

Regional Systems Operations Manger, large regional hospital

The importance of selecting a good integrator cannot be understated. During the selection process, the integrator must be scrutinized at least as much as the product and vendor. Too often product and vendor decisions are made and the integrator is an afterthought. Do not make this common mistake. Include the following integrator requirements as part of the selection criteria:

- » Identify the number of IPT implementations completed.
- » Identify what types of environments they have deployed in (e.g. network infrastructure, verticals, multi-site, etc.).
- » Provide at least three and preferably five references from similar implementations.
- » Arrange at least one site visit to a similar deployment.
- » Provide vendor certifications for all integrator staff participating in the implementation.



The Importance of an Experienced Integrator

“And [the integrator we selected] was one that actually demonstrated the ability to implement this technology successfully, which was key. I even comment on that every time somebody talks to me about VoIP; for a successful implementation, you must have [a good integrator].”

CIO, large commercial real estate firm

Even if there is an existing relationship with the integrator, ensure that they meet the criteria for an IPT implementation. The integrator may be an excellent partner for network or traditional telephony deployments, but may not have experience with IPT. A track record of successful IPT implementations is critical when selecting an integrator.

Recommendations

The product is an important part of the selection criteria for an IPT solution, but vendor and integrator selection are at least equally important. Use the ITA Premium [“IP Telephony Selection Tool”](#) to help identify the best product, vendor, and integrator fit; consider the following when making a selection decision:

1. **A homogeneous network and IPT infrastructure can reduce vendor support headaches.** A single point of contact and support for the network and IPT infrastructure eliminates finger pointing between vendors. As a result, the implementation and ongoing support and operation of the IPT solution can be simplified. In theory this should not be an issue, but in reality it often is, which makes a homogeneous infrastructure an attractive option for many enterprises.
2. **The stability and strategy of the vendor must be evaluated.** Evaluate vendors based on long-term viability, R&D investment, and current and future strategic focus. Purchasing a product from a vendor that is a candidate for a buyout or financially unstable can end up being a nightmare in the future. Look for vendors that have made a significant commitment to IPT R&D, have a viable product roadmap, and are demonstrated market leaders.
3. **Integrator expertise and experience is a must.** Carefully evaluate VARs/integrators and only select those with a proven track record of successful implementations. Get references, perform site visits, and ask for credentials from all potential integrators.



Bottom Line

Enterprises confronted with selecting an IPT solution often focus on the product itself and neglect the vendor and reseller/integrator. Leading product features and functions are generally very comparable for most enterprises. Focus as much on the strength of the vendor, and the experience and expertise of the integrator when selecting a solution.