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Removing the Barriers to Truly Seamless PBX-Mobile Integration

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Seamless integration of mobile phones and enterprise communication systems has been an industry need for longer than most of us can remember. In its infancy, back in the early to mid 1990s, the barrier to entry for tight integration was the technology itself, which just wasn't up to the task. But now that technology is no longer a significant barrier, the issues standing in the way are organizational and more pragmatic.

This is the case on all three sides of the triangle – service provider, enterprise, and end user. There is a great misunderstanding among these groups about what integration means and how it will affect the way they do business. End users fear unreasonable restrictions in the use of their mobile device; enterprises have unrealistic views about the extent to which they are already mobile; and service providers equate integration with a potential assault on their minutes-of-use business model.

Depending on who drives the migration to mobile-PBX integration – and how it is implemented – each of these fears could, in fact, come true.

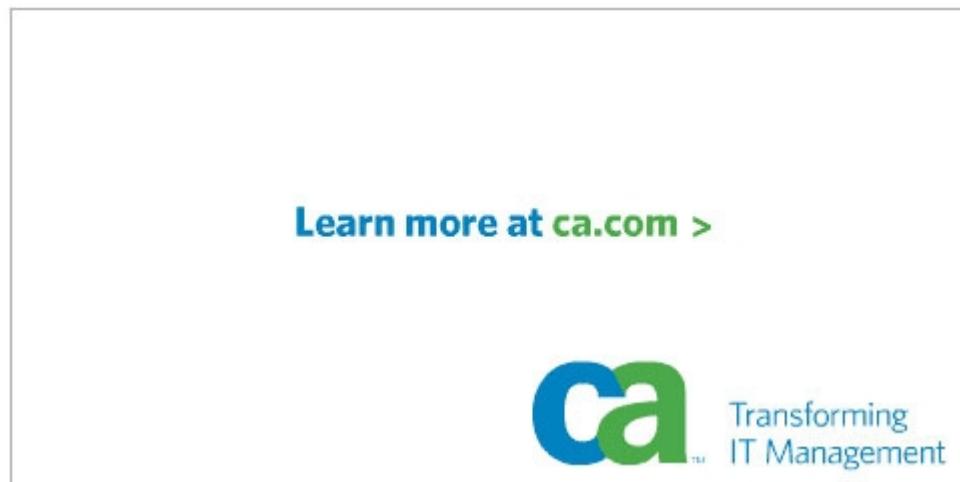
Let's start with the enterprise. Ask an IT or telecom director at a typical mid-sized to large company what percentage of their communications budgets go towards mobility, and in all likelihood they will estimate way below the reality – many say 10 percent. That's based on what they calculate in terms of mobile service costs and employees' usage of mobile devices versus their desk phones. The truth is, the "average" figure is often 30 percent. The old adage of "if you can't measure it, you can't manage it" definitely applies here. At too many companies, mobility is simply out of view and therefore out of real control.

Employees' migration to mobile phones has been driven by convenience and accessibility. A large percentage of workers are away from their desks much more than they are at them, so they encourage contacts to call them on their mobile phones, rather than end up in voice mail. This represents a major shift in calling patterns, and not just for road warriors. It also applies workers who may only leave the building at lunchtime but who make and take calls outside typical office hours and on weekends.

Sometimes mobile phones are part of a company plan, but just as often employees are using personal phones and billing the costs back to the company. The question of who owns the phone becomes another symptom of the chaotic communications situation for an enterprise.

Attempts at Control

Enterprises trying to gain control of the situation too often implement integration solutions that solve only part of the problem at best, and don't deliver the seamless mobile integration they want. Such solutions basically "copy" mobile service aspects onto the PBX and the PBX functions onto the mobile phone. The problem is, these approaches ignore a Basic Truth: People just want to pick up a phone and dial.



If software has to be loaded onto the mobile phone, requiring users to input additional unique sequences to make a call (unlike the way they dial at the desk), the Basic Truth is ignored, and users react predictably. That is, they eventually find ways to work around these sequences and make the phone convenient and efficient

for them. So much for integration.

For a service provider, the misconception is that if an enterprise customer moves to some form of PBX-mobile integration, the carrier is automatically going to lose minutes of use and revenue. That can be the case, but it doesn't have to be, if the carrier takes a proactive approach and encourages the right kind of integration.

Carriers have been accustomed to offering bundles of minutes and a handful of phone selections to enterprises, treating them as collections of consumers rather than paying attention to their specific business needs. By proactively approaching an enterprise and offering a partnership, in which the carrier provides managed services that integrate with how the people in the enterprise do business, the carrier can take the driver's seat.

Today, the typical enterprise is served by numerous wireless carriers. If carriers can leverage the appeal of fully integrated communications across the enterprise, the door is opened to enterprise-wide agreements, reduced customer support demands, increased subscriber loyalty, and growth in market share.

Studies show that enterprise churn tends to fall in the seven-to-10-year range, compared with two to three years for an average consumer. Given the current cost of customer acquisition, this makes the trade-off worth it. There may be a change in average minutes of use per subscriber, but the lower churn, and increased number of enterprise subscribers in conjunction with seamless integration will more than make up for that. Master agreements can also pave the way for sale of incremental high-value, high-margin applications in the enterprise.

Overcoming Objections

Enterprises are likely to resist initially if a carrier does suggest such a partnership. Their fears, understandably, are cost and control. If these enterprises can't handle the situation now, they see it only getting worse if more employees use mobile phones.

To win them over, carriers must convince enterprises that a true mobile-PBX integration solution will enhance control, improve productivity, and keep a lid on costs. Yet the offered approach must, at the same time, improve the overall business for the carrier. All stakeholders in the convergence ecosystem – the enterprise, the carrier, and the end user – must have their needs met for true,

seamless integration to be successful.

True integration marries each employee's existing mobile phone – regardless of type or vendor – with the enterprise's PBX or Centrex services. With this integration, a single phone number can be shared by the office and mobile phone, operating according to the enterprise's policies and the end user's needs. Each call from either phone has access to all the PBX's calling features and money-saving corporate dialing plans, along with a single, unified voice mailbox.

In essence, every mobile phone would function as a true PBX extension, without special access numbers or handset software to download, activate, and support, along with the convenience of four- or five-digit internal calls. The enterprise and its users can manage and enforce preferences and policies for mobile phone access. Switching between the mobile and office phones becomes seamless.

Finally, the carrier-provided solution would give the enterprise the control it desires. The single phone number would be owned by the enterprise, usage of the corporate dialing plans could be enforced, along with mobile phone policies such as time of day or location management, or limits on the use of wireless data and personal calling. As an added benefit, if necessary from a regulatory perspective, all mobile calls could be tracked, monitored, or recorded, just like calls from office phones.

Dual-mode cellular/Wi-Fi operation is being deployed by some enterprises. Mobile operators can capitalize on this trend by working with companies who are choosing the voice over Wi-Fi path by supporting them with a user experience that is consistent independent of the transport. That is, the dual-mode device works the same way regardless of the network it is locked onto, cellular or Wi-Fi.

What carriers need to remember is that when enterprises take their own PBX-mobile integration steps, it isn't a move intended primarily to cut the carrier out of the picture, but instead to gain and maintain control. Unfortunately, the carrier may suffer the collateral damage from the enterprise's initiative. Instead, being proactive and driving the integration can yield tremendous benefits for the carrier.

A carrier-generated solution that can offer three key attributes will have tremendous appeal to an enterprise struggling to deal with integration. Those attributes are:

- Simplicity
- Integration of any mobile phone with any PBX

- No need for user behavioral changes

Most the enterprise-centric solutions are vertically integrated. They require use of a particular mobile device and communications system. That pumps up the cost of changing out mobile phones, so a solution that can work with existing mobile devices and PBXs is very enticing. Solutions that require additional software on the mobile device create a user complexity vs. convenience issue, as well as support and potential deployment obstacles. Again, the least intrusive, simplest solution is the one that users will embrace and that will benefit the enterprise.

Through partnerships, carriers will build lasting relationships with their enterprise customers. That will not only keep minutes on the wireless network, but generate more usage as the benefits of the truly integrated solution are extended to more employees.

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