

“The one constant in life is change”

Migrating from SS7 to IP means keeping your options open

Adax Europe spokesperson: Robin Kent, Director of European Operations

When the IP revolution kicked off over five years ago it took the telecommunications world by storm. Some Operators acted quickly to ensure legacy SS7 networks could interface with the new arrival, but this was the extent of their preparations for the future, and many did nothing.

Five years on and the lack of preparation continues to haunt them and now it could cost them. Contrary to predictions, IP is not the only signaling protocol in town – SS7 still underpins the world of telecommunications and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. But the increasing demand for Value Added Services such as ringtones and music streaming now means that IP networks must talk to each other. Do we make the same mistakes again by planning in the narrowest of terms and overspending on our overall infrastructure investment? Or do we learn our lesson and plan for the future, increasing revenue and reducing infrastructure and deployment costs in the long run?

The answer may seem straightforward but many operators are missing out on opportunities to reduce both their CAPEX and OPEX by insisting on re-treading the old ground that tripped them up in the past. Robin Kent, Director of European Operations at Adax, calls for operators to be flexible and approach IP migration with an open mind. Failure to do this and in another five years time they will be faced with yet more overhaul needs and a huge bill to boot.

Weighing up the options

Value Added Services such as online gaming and video calling are clear examples of killer revenue opportunities and they can benefit from IP technology to be delivered cost-effectively. SS7 is not always the most efficient way of supporting these Value Added Services, but ripping out and replacing SS7 infrastructure completely would be a grave error on any operators' part. There are certain functions that are still better fulfilled by SS7 and will continue to be in the short to medium term until IP technology has developed further.

That said, ignoring IP completely would also be ill-advised. For example, the mobile phone market continues to grow rapidly and with it brings fantastic opportunities for those with IP networks in place. A recent report by technology research group, Gartner, showed that global mobile phone sales in Q3 rose by the greatest proportion for four years (22 per cent). The report also estimates that mobile sales will hit 810 million by the end of 2005 and predicts a 40 per cent growth in sales throughout Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Most significantly, Gartner predicts that worldwide mobile data revenues are expected to grow at more than 28 per cent annually (2003-08). The revenue opportunities to be gained from Value Added Services are clear but without IP are, at best, costly or out of reach and, at worst, non-existent.

Continued failure to ensure interoperability between SS7→IP as well as IP→IP infrastructure components will provide a non future-proofed network that is incapable of providing adequate support. We all thought SS7 would be dead by now but it isn't – does that not tell us that we must expect the unexpected?

There is no magic formula that can be prescribed to upgrade network infrastructures. The evaluation process differs immensely from one operator to the next and is highly dependent on current technology and future plans. Operators should therefore beware of the salesmen trying to pitch a 'one-size-fits-all' solution; there is no such thing.

Open your mind

It is the ongoing evolution of IP in contrast with the solid but staid SS7 that makes it the signaling technology of the future. The most effective mode of transition is open to debate; there are many industry standards to follow, but I would strongly encourage operators to exercise caution before adopting them wholesale.

It is fundamental that migration is approached with flexibility and an open mind, and this means that they must look beyond the black and white view perpetuated by individual standards.

The ultimate goal of switching to IP must be to create one common platform capable of supporting an operator's entire evolutionary development without overspending unnecessarily over the years. By planning for the here and now rather than for every eventuality, the long term cost implications – not to mention the degradation in service throughout each overhaul project – are surely not worth the risk.



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