

# Pipeline

Knowledge Is Power

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## **Streamline. Unify. Consolidate.**

Network Consolidation is a fix we can't afford to ignore  
by Tim Young

### **Worth It**

There are many reasons for network consolidation. Acquisitions. OPEX reduction. Attempts at network simplification. Every reason is valuable and obvious in its necessity and practicality. Network consolidation is something that's been addressed many times in the last few years, and it continues to be a big issue for SPs. M/C Venture Partners, in naming its Top 10 Trends to Watch in 2008 list for the communications space lists consolidation at number two. They note that "consolidation will continue to be a driving force in the telecommunications services industries. Wireless carriers, CLECs, fiber carriers, and rural carriers are all improving their business models through consolidation, enabling higher profitability and quality services for their customers."



As rollouts continue, bandwidth is at more of a premium than ever, so the ability to ensure that all the aspects of the network are located, consolidated, streamlined, and used to their full potential is truly mission-critical.

There are obvious economic concerns behind the move. Sure, consolidation, like any process that involves extensive research and auditing of available resources, can be expensive and painful, but it ultimately produces a leaner, more efficient network that maximizes resources. A bit of CAPEX now, reduced OPEX later. Spend money to make money, eh?

### **So Much To Do, So Little Time**

So what are the necessary elements to facilitate network consolidation? Where does a telco or enterprise begin?

One key to solid network consolidation has got to be network visibility. Does your solution have to combination of overall visibility combined with the drill-down capability to examine pockets of the network that may cause you problems and cost you money? Network awareness is vital for a wide variety of reasons, but its ability to foster consolidation and increased efficiency within the network is near the top of the list.

Another key to easing the burden of network consolidation is the always-growing role of standards. Isn't that a big part of what standards are all about? Interoperability? And when is a lack of interoperability more glaringly, painfully obvious than when you're attempting to consolidate multiple networks into one? For years, standards were an afterthought and equipment manufacturers essentially designed hardware and accompanying software on a proprietary basis, leaving CSPs to cobble together disparate elements into a smooth and fluid network. Where did that get us? A standards-based approach will allow for greater cohesion for now and less painful consolidation in the future.

Proper network consolidation can also fall under the umbrella of systems integration. Systems integrators can be instrumental in making sure that pieces of the network that don't have the benefit of being standardized still hum along harmoniously. Of course, on one level, a systems integrator focusing on consolidation is only doing his job well if he's aiming to make his job obsolete, but I suppose the same could be said for lots of professions: Police officers. Efficiency experts. Doctors researching the cure for athlete's foot.

These are some of the pieces of the puzzle that ultimately leads to consolidated networks. Furthermore, they're keys to solving the problem of network consolidation as it exists today. The network got to *be* that way through generations of unmanaged growth. Networks. Storage. Servers. All of these things were generally tacked on in an ad hoc fashion and without a larger plan. And what did this all serve to do in the long run? Drive up the total cost of ownership (TCO). With TCO skyrocketing as a result of inefficient network construction and maintenance, few can afford to continue such unsustainable practices. Rube Goldberg machines are fun to play with, but make for terrible businesses.

### **Along the Way**

Network consolidation is neither a quick fix nor a silver bullet. It takes time to get the network ready to go, and you can't just shut down the network while you're

doing the necessary work. Subscribers are willing to pardon a little “dust,” but can't be denied essential services along the way. Michael Palackdharry of Convergys explores that in the article on ensuring customer loyalty during network consolidation that appears in this issue, and it's definitely an article worth reading.

Also, we must keep in mind that even a consolidated, visible, integrated, standardized network is still just a route. A pathway. Subscribers aren't nearly as interested in the pipe as they are in what comes out of that pipe, and any activity undertaken to improve the network must be done without jeopardizing other aspects of service.

### **Bigger Picture**

It's clear that consolidation is key. However, many have begun to refer to network consolidation as a part of a more epic process: network evolution. Evolution and consolidation are distinct areas, but the idea is that as the network evolves and becomes more sophisticated, visibility increases, a more holistic approach becomes appropriate, and consolidation for the sake of increased efficiency becomes a no-brainer. The shape of this evolved network will, for most, rely heavily on service delivery platforms. SDPs enable the sort of flexibility that allow consolidation to be considerably less painful. Ultimately, network consolidation can be more of a byproduct of an evolving network than an end in and of itself.

And isn't that what we'd all prefer? For the evolution of the network to take care of problems like consolidation? It's times like this that we may wish networks were truly and legitimately alive. An organic network wouldn't need to be *made* to evolve. It could do so automatically. Then again, I've been watching a lot of “Battlestar Galactica” lately, and am acutely and unreasonably afraid of such a proposition. It's better that network evolution remains firmly in the control of the engineers and the decision-makers so as not to get any crazy ideas of its own, right? Clunky sci-fi references aside, I just hope that we'll all remember that, no matter how rocky the road becomes, the journey is a worthy one.

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