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Closing the Loop between Assurance and Fulfillment

by Dale Thomas

In today's highly competitive, complex and converging market, service providers are focusing on improving the customer experience, reducing costs, accelerating time-to-market of services and assuring smooth introduction from day one. However, one of the main barriers to achieving these goals is the disconnect that exists today between service fulfillment and service assurance. Service providers can overcome this obstacle by transforming their fulfillment and assurance processes and enabling the end-to-end management of the entire service lifecycle on a single platform.

The Disconnect between Service Fulfillment and Service Assurance

Service fulfillment and service assurance are critical to both the smooth and efficient operations of a service provider's business and to the customer experience. Service fulfillment systems support the processes that ensure service providers offer the services customers have requested in a timely and correct manner. Service assurance systems are responsible for the execution of all the activities needed to ensure the availability and performance of services provided to the customer.

The disconnect between service fulfillment and service assurance exists in the service management layer of TeleManagement Forum's (TMF's) enhanced telecom operation map (eTOM). It spans service providers' environments including processes (that are mostly separate and don't intersect people and organizations), departments and people dealing with fulfillment or assurance but not both, as well as systems and vendors who can deal with either fulfillment or assurance but not both.

How was this Disconnect Created in the First Place?

The problem service providers faced was that legacy service fulfillment and assurance processes were designed for a different business paradigm than the one in place today. Historically, there were far fewer and much simpler services and these services required fewer modifications. Once services were activated and service assurance began, there was little need to go back to the fulfillment process, especially not in real time.

Customer and business expectations were also considerably different. Fulfillment automation did not need to be implemented when the service was launched, but

only when a threshold was crossed. Until that point was reached, service providers used manual processes and ad hoc solutions.

As a result, service providers often divided responsibility for these distinct processes between two departments, with few interactions between them. These departments issued separate requests for proposals (RFPs) – usually at different times, as service fulfillment systems were often deployed after service assurance systems – to two different sets of specialist vendors. The vendors involved either had domain expertise in fulfillment or assurance, but not in both areas. This reinforced the process gap experienced by service providers, as their vendors had neither the knowledge nor products to provide a single end-to-end service management solution. This approach created overall efficiency issues for service providers as well as added to operational costs. It also meant an increase in the “integration tax” as they had to integrate multiple, disparate systems into their BSS/OSS environment.

Today’s telecommunications environment is much more complex, with blurring boundaries between service fulfillment and service assurance. Managing the fulfillment and assurance of services is no longer an easy task. In this new world of service management, we see significant commonality and interaction between service fulfillment and assurance processes making it vital for SF and SA personnel to collaborate.



The introduction of all IP networks and multi-service access nodes means there is no longer the simple one-to-one relationship between a service and a network. Today, any service can be deployed over any network, and vice versa. For example, PayTV can be deployed not just over cable, but also over DSL, fiber, satellite, WiMax and so on. There are also many more services with service bundles being frequently modified – sometimes even in real time. There are also more logical layers; therefore, it is no longer good enough to manage just the customer, or the network or the resource. It is now important to manage *the service* as an entity in its own right. Additionally, in today's service provider environment, service data is usually held in several types of systems – legacy fulfillment or assurance systems and GIS, subscriber management in each service/technology silos. By linking service fulfillment and assurance, service providers can have a single 360 degree view of

services data, eliminating the need to replicate the same information across fulfillment and assurance systems.

To cope with the increased service velocity and real time modifications, service providers need to implement a service management platform that can support this challenge and move between fulfillment and assurance quickly and efficiently. They can no longer afford to rely on manual operations, which result in lost time, poor customer service and high operational costs. In addition to that, because of the need today to accelerate TTM of services and reduce service introduction cost, service providers need to deploy fulfillment and assurance at the same time.

A Yankee Group report from September 2007 reaffirmed this conclusion stating that "It's more critical than ever for service assurance and service fulfillment to forge strategic partnerships and provide a comprehensive roadmap to the market."

Closing the Loop by Linking Service Fulfillment and Service Assurance on a Single Service Management Platform

A single service management platform closes the loop between fulfillment and assurance, creating a range of benefits for service providers. It allows providers to reuse interfaces and process fragments, for example, which can subsequently be triggered in either the service fulfillment or assurance context. Similarly, there is no need to integrate between many disparate service fulfillment and assurance systems. A common single 360 degree view of services data links customer products to network services and resources, which is critical to delivering accurate, efficient customer service. This results in increased operational efficiency, reduced implementation time, cost and risk and a better overall customer experience.

The single service management platform approach is also aligned with eTOM's service management horizontal layer, and has been adopted by leading service providers when transforming their OSS. Such service providers have moved from a vertically-integrated architecture to a horizontal alignment of customer management, service management and resource management.

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