

White Paper: Put The Customer First. Managing The User Experience

"Customers today want their networks to be fast and reliable and they are quick to complain when a service fails to meet their expectations. Businesses need to shift their focus to the user experience to ensure they meet the increasingly high standards demanded of them," writes Jennifer Scott.

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Introduction

Long gone are the days when the network was a concept that the public knew nothing about. Whether they are watching a video on a smartphone, logging onto Netflix on their home broadband or simply taking a phone call on the land line, users are swift to blame technology when something goes wrong. They want their service to be fast, reliable and instant. And this is reflected in the world of business.

At work, users are expected to be switched on and online all the time. They want to make VoIP calls when they are travelling abroad and to check their emails at the airport. They need to rely on the network and will look straight to the IT department if something goes wrong.

This means every enterprise running a network, from the global mobile operator to the small business, needs to take a more user-centric approach to keeping their customers and employees happy.

But what does this change in approach mean for firms and is focusing on the end user the best way to operate?

Senior analyst Anil Rao has been studying this question for Analysys Mason. He says things have changed beyond recognition over the past 20 years and the biggest influence on the enterprise has been the model adopted by large telecoms operators in their networks.



"End users have always cared about the service," he says. "They weren't bothered about the pipes, who used which equipment, or even who was running it. But in the past, because of the monopoly of telecoms operators, the big guys running the network didn't have to worry about the customer. The big guys could do whatever they want. They could be as network focused as they liked and all about playing with their own technology in-house."

This was the same throughout business. Network engineers had specialist knowledge and could spend their time focusing on the technology they were using, rather than thinking about what went on outside their datacentre. "But things have changed," says Rao. "Many markets got liberalised with more competitors coming in."

Enterprises no longer have only the large traditional vendors to choose from. The world is a bigger place with many more systems on offer. This also means there needs to be stronger collaboration between suppliers across a variety of networks, rather than one player having total control.

User expectations

Bob Tarzey, senior analyst at Quocirca, says: "The challenge is not about a single network living up to a single service level agreement, but ensuring a patchwork of network resources deliver the required user experience."

"This is further complicated by the fact the many applications are now accessed directly by external users, so there is no direct control of the network connection that will be used, so application delivery must be optimised as much as possible for potentially poor network connections."

So the CIO has had to change their mindset to think about the customer experience, rather than just looking inward at the network technology. Customers are no longer blind to poorly performing networks and expect much more out from their technology providers, both at home and at work.

Rao says: "Users absolutely have higher expectations of their service than ever before and there are two key reasons. "First is the proliferation of smartphones, especially in the developed world, but increasingly in emerging markets, with cheap Android phones flooding into India and China."

"But on top of this, you have the arrival of the over-the-top providers. The likes of Facebook, Google and WhatsApp have become their own service providers, offering messaging services for free across the public internet."

Technically competent users who are attached to services that work quickly and for free in the real world expect the same level of performance regardless of whether they are using a work phone or a messaging system.

"Smartphones give access to users all the time," Rao says. "They want to be switched on and know what is going on around the world at the touch of a button. This may not have been so important 15 years ago... but now the changing landscape is putting enormous pressure on [enterprises]."

So network managers need be proactive. They need to look at network availability, performance and quality of service to differentiate their organisation from their competitors.

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Anil Rao, Analysys Mason

But it takes a big change in culture and a mind shift to move away from focusing on the performance hardware in the datacentre to thinking more about the services it provides to users.

There are instances where this is already happening successfully. Some companies are reskilling their employees to make sure they join the new wave of user-focused network managers, rather than staying in the datacentre and focusing on the technology.

“They are trying to understand the network from an end-to-end perspective, with even more understanding of user behaviour,” explains Rao. “This means knowing how much of their network usage goes on video, for example, and how users are experiencing the apps they use for it. The end game is to be user experience focused.”

This does, of course, create some problems for the original network engineers, who have been working in a technology-focused way for many years and now have to learn a whole new approach.

Relevant skills

“Organisations need to reskill engineers for managing virtualised and consolidated networking,” says Tarzey. “Sadly, they struggle to find skills and/or keep them up to date. The majority outsource to some extent and place a high premium on network accreditations.”

Rao adds: “The people who work there are highly technical network people and are absolutely required, but that is not going to win the battle. The next battle of competitiveness is on service experience.

“The challenge is to get that culture change, getting people to think differently to move away from network, culture and behaviour. It is definitely a challenge, but some are taking a leap on this aspect, hiring specific people from outside and using this as an incentive for people to raise their game, even in terms of their positions in the company to move from tech-focused roles.”

"A pure tech approach to networking that fails to align with user requirements is no longer tenable"

Bob Tarzey, Quocirca



Will user-centric networks be the only way forward?

Tarzey says: "All our research shows the user is king. This is especially true as organisations engage more and more directly with consumers. A pure tech approach to networking that fails to align with user requirements is no longer tenable."

There are major technology changes coming though, however, and every enterprise will need to make sure their user-focused engineers keep their skills up to date and that suppliers make the management process easier.

Network Evolution

"What is happening in networking is the biggest change in the past 30 years and it is going to happen in next five to 10 years: network virtualisation," says Rao. "With the cloud, the rise of Amazon services, it has all taken IT by storm. Where compute and storage have been virtualised, a similar evolution has been happening in the network.

"So network managers are going to be even more pressured to be more technology focused because the change is going to occur, but at the same time they cannot lose focus on the customer.

"End users like you and me don't care; all we care about is whether we can stream videos, send emails or make calls, and the bar is higher now, with faster speeds in the world of mobile, wireless and fixed.

"As these speeds have increased naturally, so have user expectations. So from a network manager perspective, there will be more pressure because of technical changes, but no sympathy or let-up from the users."

But again, whether you are a multinational operator that offers its network as a service or an enterprise that is thinking about its employees, there are lessons to be learned.

Every member of an organisation, from the chief executive with an iPad to the cleaner with a swipe-in card, is part of the network and it needs to operate smoothly. Anything less and those valued employees may well jump ship to a company that appears more forward thinking and focused on the experience of its staff.

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