

Are You Viewing Your IT Network as a “Utility?” If Not, You’re Asking to be Left Behind

By Charles L. Nault

You walk into your office and flip a switch and the lights immediately illuminate. Were it not so, it would be a rare day indeed, and one quickly ruined. Barring some catastrophic act of God, you expect a utility like power to simply be there, at your fingertips, at all times, whenever you want it.

Your information technology (IT) network (computers, phones, fax, Blackberries, printers, etc.) has now reached “utility” status as well. Just as the utility of power is required to run your lights, your IT network infrastructure is required to run your e-mail, Internet access, printing needs and a host of other mission-critical applications that you just cannot function properly without, both in your office and outside. Today’s users expect that when they open their laptop--anywhere--it will connect them to their network and be fully functional without having to think about it.

Many students entering the workforce today have grown up assuming that high-speed bandwidth will always be available in their homes, schools and even on their cell phones. So IT is no longer a secondary consideration for any of us ... it’s a **must!**

For actuaries, the situation is even more critical. Your clients demand information to be sent to them not only quickly but safely and securely. There can be no hint of that very private information getting lost out there on the Internet, available for some competitor to feast upon. E-mail, while convenient, can be a very untrustworthy way to do this, so an extranet--a secure network between partners--is always the best bet, insuring utility-level security in communications. If you’re not operating this way now, it’s high time you begin.

Richard Pastore, editor of *CIO* magazine, recently wrote of the changing technology mindset by citing “convergence” as the new CIO buzzword. This replaces, he explained, the age-old mantra of “alignment,” since IT can no longer be treated as a separate entity just trying to fit in. Instead your communications systems must be viewed as an integral cog of every aspect and every strategic goal of your business.

So what is the significance of this new “utility” mindset to your actuarial consulting practice? How should it change your life?

For one thing, it means hiring an IT expert to work with you, if only on a very part-time basis, who exhibits this utility frame of mind. If you had a nephew or a cousin plug in all your computers or advise you on what to buy, you may be treating this area too lightly. Simply employing someone familiar with the tech world to help you is no longer enough.

To what extent does your “IT manager” understand all the many implications of seeing your IT communications network as a system that absolutely must never go down? Can he help you insure that your network will always be there? Does he in effect speak the “language” of your network-as-utility?

Also, because the information you transmit is so private, does your IT person understand the best ways to keep it secure? With your other utilities, vandals are not looking to short-circuit your fuse panel or clock your water pipes just for kicks. Not so with technology. So in addition to the expertise required to design, implement and maintain your network, comes the ongoing need to secure it as well.

So what does it really take to make your network a true always-on, always-fully functional, always-fast and always-safe “utility” network? It first takes a solid commitment. You need to invest and do so with wisdom and confidence, meaning that your technology must exist as a means to an end. You must stop yourself from taking the easy way out, or the cheapest way, and start spending exactly what is required to achieve your strategic business objectives, not a dollar more, but not a dollar less either.

Fortunately, there are low-cost tools affordable to a business of your size, just as there are larger, more complex tools for larger, more complex organizations. One small firm we know found a “shareware” (translation: free, but you have to know what you’re doing) tool that allows it to monitor every device in its network, and to give an early warning signal should any trouble be brewing. Looking for such tools now, or for an outsourced provider of such tools, rather than waiting for a calamity to fall is symptomatic of a healthy “utility networking” mindset.

Investing with confidence means that once you have your technology road map drawn up, you find the right people who can design the integration of that technology into your existing network and can swiftly and effectively complete the implementation, then provide both proactive as well as reactive support. Even the smallest network today is a complex one, touched by many hands and eyes, so a critical step is the transition from implementation to ongoing support. Your “project manager” must clearly define this transition including all necessary steps to make it as smooth as possible. This should include a strong dose of end user training.

In terms of ongoing support, this used to be “you have a problem, you call for help,” a notion that is largely reactive. This approach does not qualify as “utility” thinking. Every hour, every minute of your time, every number data-bit of your life’s work, is valuable and represents real money to you or to your clients. Reactive support must now be seen as a thing of the past. If your network is to truly become the utility that it needs to be, try imagining all your customers waiting around for you to restore your data files from backup in the middle of the

day. Do a quick napkin calculation of the cost of all that. It's not a pretty picture! A utility network has built in redundant servers that immediately, transparently take over in the event of failure.

If you have been assuming that you can afford for your IT functions and network to be anything but "always-on" like a utility, think again. Some of your competitors are already there, especially the larger ones. Waiting even one day longer to join them leaves you and your practice in grave danger of being left farther behind.

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