

The IP central: 'Why would anybody do this?'

It's complicated, expensive and full of headaches, but it's very likely necessary for business survival

BY DANIEL GELINAS

IP technology has been "coming" to security—mostly accompanied by fanfare—for a while. As numerous reports have made clear, IP opens up all kinds of new opportunity for the security industry in the form of new services and added value for the end user—both of which translate to more revenue. It also, however, opens up new worlds of complexity and expense in the form of new infrastructure needed, more training for personnel, and the convergence of security and IT.

Further, it may even be completely necessary as regulatory agencies look at completely eliminated the analog phone system.

Perhaps no one in the security industry is feeling the encroachment of an all-IP world more than the central station. How is IP changing the world of the central station? What are the challenges you're facing? How are things better? And how are they worse?

A Dec. 1, 2009 public notice from the FCC seeks comment on a possible nationwide switch from a public switched telephone network to IP, preparatory to a possible mandatory transition similar to the FCC-enforced switch from analog to digital broadcast television that occurred in early 2009. According to the public notice the switch to IP is most likely a matter of "when" rather than "if."

"We seek to understand which policies and regulatory structures may facilitate, and which may hinder the efficient migration to an all-IP world," the notice states. Yet again, IP is coming. What do you need to do and know before it gets here?

According to Morgan Hertel, director of central station operations for Anaheim, Calif.-based Mace CSSS, there are three areas of concern for central stations in the face IP technology: IP network training (IT department), infrastructure (new, sometimes proprietary, equipment), and product training (more specialized personnel). All of these concerns cost money and time. "You will need to invest more than ever on training for not only installation but sales and support staff," Hertel said. "This is a very steep learning curve, and you must get started now—not later."

IT DEPARTMENT

Everyone *Security Systems News* spoke with agreed central stations looking to stay relevant in an IP age needed to get past the sometimes adversarial relationship physical security has had



Jacky Grimm

with IT. The successful IP-based central station needs to foster the growth of an evolved, outward-facing IT department that not only protects its own network, but shows the same concern for their clients' networks and data, according to Diebold director of security solutions Jacky Grimm. "If [a client has] outsourced most of their IT, well an outsourced IT provider doesn't usually understand the world of security from a physical security standpoint," Grimm said. "You have to have people in place who understand it's not just how your own IP works, it's how other people's work, as well."

Jerry Cordasco, VP of operations for G4S' Burlington, Mass.-based monitoring and data center, feels the development and training of the new IP-based central's IT department is paramount. "From a business-to-business standpoint, their IT people want to talk to people who know what they're talking about. You don't want to just have any goober on the phone talking to corporate IT, because they're going to go 'Look, forget it!'" Cordasco said. "You need good IT people on your staff so that when questions and issues come up they can answer them intelligently."

Monitronics VP Mitch Clarke said, given the lack of standards in IP, the days of an IT department that simply looked after and protected their own server were gone. "The IT/telecom department is no longer managing just a landline IP, and the other big piece of it is all these interactive services. At one point we were kind of focused on one or two partners. There's now a multitude of them, each using IP—some proprietary, some not," Clarke said. "So the telecom/IT department is frustrated that the industry isn't more ubiquitous ... The amount of knowledge that has to be ready and on-site 24/7/365 has gotten much more complex."

INFRASTRUCTURE

Diebold's Grimm said the expense of building a new IP infrastructure didn't stop at the hardware and software purchase. "Your receivers are different now ... The old receivers that did dial will not do IP, you need new IP receivers," Grimm said. "That's additional expense and additional training to have programmers and tech support people who talk IP need to be trained to upgrade the infrastructure."

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—Mitch Clarke, Monitronics

C.O.P.S. EVP Don Maden agreed that the complex, non-standardized IP world meant a significant investment in well-trained staff and proprietary software and hardware. "If you're building a network that's capable of handling critical transmission—because you can afford zero downtime with alarm traffic—you cover yourself with respect to redundancy," Maden said. "We have multiple paths into the building for IP connectivity ... and it's no longer just about little bits of data, but it's about video, now ... We were getting toward standard receivers, and you could handle multiple formats, but as everyone gets into IP video and alarm transmissions, it requires proprietary receiving equipment. So you can't just be a generic central any more."

Mace's Hertel said advances in IP technology have moved at an incredible pace and that in order to stay relevant the central station needed to have a strong infrastructure, made up oftentimes of multiple proprietary versions of the same equipment. "Today's networks and security considerations are 10-fold compared to what they were just a few years ago," Hertel said. "Because none of the manufacturers ever adopted any standards, each brand is unique. So for a central station to be competitive you have to buy two of everything. It's expensive—not only initially but also ongoing costs and support."

So how does a small central station just monitoring burg and fire make the switch to IP? According to Hertel, there are a few options. "For those that have not started any kind of IP platform they are going to have to start. This includes people, infrastructure and new receivers and connectivity. It's a significant investment in the operation," Hertel said. "We have invested considerably in the idea that we can be that hosted solution. Virtually all of our services can be used as a software-as-a-service model, where we handle all the back-end technology and allow other centrals to use our systems. In this model there is no investment for the smaller center other than Internet access and desktop PCs."

TRAINING

A central's investment in personnel doesn't stop at hiring a crack, outward-facing IT department. All employees, especially those in customer service, need to understand the technology, its attributes and limitations. "You need to have the right people who understand IP connectivity doesn't just mean I'm getting messages over the Internet," said Diebold's Grimm. "Their purpose in life has to be to serve

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the customers."

Monitronics' Clarke agrees. "Do we want our central agents to be aware of what triggers have been set and whether or not they need to have that in their arsenal of knowledge when they get a



Mitch Clarke

signal?" Clarke said. "We're in the mode of figuring out what the adoption of these new products of interactivity are, and when we think a self-directed notification needs to be a human intervention ... Where we really see things changing is at the help desk where we have to help people understand how to use these new features: 'Well, are the police going to come if the front door opens?' No. You're going to get an email."

"[IP] impacts our people the most when a dealer is trying to either learn about a new product or activate a new customer," C.O.P.S.' Maden said. It was important, he continued, to "appropriately step our people through the processes in such a way that an effective and efficient experience is consistently enjoyed by our dealers."

Everyone SSN spoke with agreed the IP-induced changes were coming or are already here. Diebold's Grimm summed up the reason one should embrace the coming of IP. "Of course this is all very complicated. It's expensive, it changes your infrastructure," Grimm said. "So why in the world would anybody ever do this? The reason is IP technology allows our customers to do more things than they could ever do before."

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