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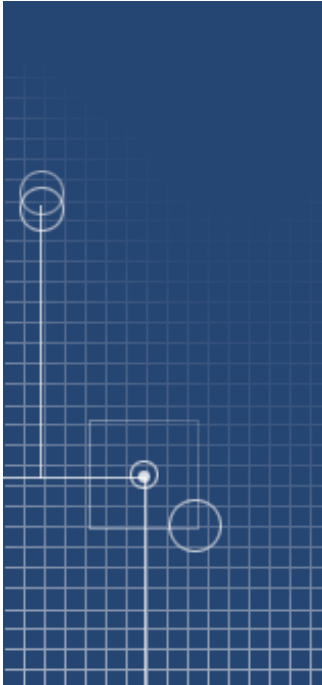
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Where's All Your Stuff?



Telecom Inventory Software Tracks Equipment, Circuits & Usage

Bob in accounting is leaving the company. Does he have a cell phone that he needs to return?

We closed the Oakland office last year. Are we still being billed for the leased line we used for a LAN bridge?

Are all of our Cisco routers up-to-date on patches?

These are just a few of the many questions that can face an IT manager today when he considers his telecommunications infrastructure. And there are certainly products to help manage the complexity. Companies such as ProfitLine, MSS Group, and Broadmargin offer complete telecommunications management packages, which are more of a blending of a hosted service and a consulting arrangement than a pure software package.

These packages can offer fine detail of telecommunications usage, according to Meta Group analyst Peter Firstbrook. "Essentially what they do is record all of your contracts and all of your carriers and then do an inventory of everything that you've got—all your circuits and services that you should be charged for. Then they will start taking your invoices directly from the carrier, and then they'll correlate those and check the invoices, check the map, check it against the assets, check it against the contract, and then if there are any disputes or any discrepancies they will go back to the carrier, resolve that discrepancy, and get the credit."

But according to Firstbrook, most of these offerings are out of reach of the small business market. Typically the cost of such an outsourced service is computed as a percentage of total telecommunications cost, and those with a \$1,000-per-month phone bill need not apply. "A \$1 million bill would be the lowest they would go," says Firstbrook.

■ Services For The Small Guy

That isn't to say that there aren't tools available for smaller companies to track their assets and usage; they just aren't so all-encompassing. For example, if you simply want to track physical assets, a product such as Remedy Software's Asset Manager might be all you need. While still not cheap at \$50,000 plus per-user licensing fees, it does offer advantages over tracking everything using an Excel spreadsheet.

"For one thing, it's a centralization standpoint," says Bob Pkeane, product manager for Asset Manager. "Folks would rather consolidate [spreadsheets] . . . into some type of central data store in order to get more of an enterprise view on what exactly they're spending and how they're spending it in order to go back to vendors, suppliers, folks who are engaged or contracted for maintenance to try to work with those folks to deliver more value on those assets."

Invoice Insight is an example of a product purely designed to handle analysis and management of telecom usage. Other players in this space include Telesoft and Avotus. Avotus is actually a broader product line, which offers a number of additional features such as inventory tracking, as well.

■ Monitoring Mobility

Wireless asset management has developed into its own niche market. According to a

report by the Meta Group, companies that track their wireless usage with a new generation of tools are reporting cost savings of 10% to 20% a month. Traqwireless and Digital Reliance are two vendors working in this space.

Using these tools, companies can not only track wireless inventory but also do rate plan optimization based on current usage. Typical costs are \$3 to \$6 per month per phone with an additional setup cost, but the Meta report claims that early savings from rate plan improvements can easily cover these expenses. According to Firstbrook, the vendors are also willing to work in small volume engagements, although the unit costs rise in those situations.

Firstbrook points out that only the high-end tools are really going to take the work off your hands completely. "The big problem with that is you've still got to populate the tool, and that takes a tremendous amount of dedication from a team of people that are only paid to do that, and most companies don't have them."

And when such a team does exist, says Firstbrook, it tends to be overburdened. "They're just overworked and underpaid and just don't have the bandwidth to go and do a complete asset tracking of all their things. So you pay one of these companies to do that. The actual asset and inventories is a subset of what you get, but more importantly, what you get is total telecom management." ■

by James Turner

What Should You Track?

Tracking your company's telecom inventory can involve more than just counting handsets. Here are some things a company can track and the types of questions such tracking helps answer.

Physical Inventory




- Who has what equipment?
- Do we need to order new hardware, or can we reuse something in existing stock?
- What equipment does a terminating employee need to return?

Circuits

- What lines are associated with which physical locations?
- Are we being billed for lines we're not using?
- How could we aggregate usage to save costs?

Cellular Usage

- Who is abusing their plans?
- How could we adjust rate plans for cost savings?

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