

Defining the Network Operating Centre

*Five key attributes of an effective
approach to managed network
operations.*

By Gary O'Neil, Systal

Network operations form the skeleton that supports your entire business infrastructure. They govern your organisation's internal and external communications, the applications you need to produce and promote goods or services, and the management of your staff. In the digital era, keeping network operations running smoothly and reliably is a key element in business continuity.

Little wonder, then, that many organisations turn to specialised managed services providers to deliver this continuity for them. Typically operating out of Network

Operations Centres, or NOCs, these companies provide levels of support ranging from basic response and advice when a network actively experiences problems, to 24/7/365 network monitoring and proactive maintenance services that aim to head off such problems *before* they happen.

In fact, there are so many businesses operating in this space, and so many different levels of service available, that it can be difficult to know how best to go about selecting a managed network operations provider. However, with an organised approach, there are five key factors that can

make the decision-making process as efficient as possible.

1 Community and culture

Your managed network operations provider will ultimately be responsible for your business staying online and operational; as such, you ideally want it to work not just as a short-term supplier, but as a long-term partner. Often this depends on the provider's business culture being well-aligned with yours, and its community being committed to forming long-term relationships.

How can you assess these qualities? Major clues can be found in the efforts an organisation takes to get to know your network, so it can understand proactively where issues *might* occur, not just respond to them as they happen. Then there are questions around team structure – will you always have the same account manager and the same core teams of engineers rotating between shifts, or will they change week on week? Consider, too, whether the NOC is UK-based or offshore – the latter will likely have some cost advantages but these may come at the expense of a close partnership, and continuity between shifts. Many providers deploying offshore NOCs use a 'follow-the-sun' model, where monitoring services are passed from office to office, time zone to time zone in order to deliver 24/7/365 coverage – the problem being that each handover potentially results in dropped information and a patchy service.

2 Technology and skills

Ultimately, your managed network operations are an extension of your in-house technology function. This means that the engineering skillsets and experience, and the technology expertise available, will have a direct and significant impact on the usefulness of your provider. Assess the numbers of first, second and third line engineers available, as well as which partnerships and certifications the provider holds with vendors like Cisco – these, of course, should be related back to the technology in *your* unique infrastructure. A good managed network service provider

should be agile across different technologies and able to adapt to what their customers are already using. Ask them about their CPD practices, and how they ensure that their engineers are always up to date with emerging technologies and software. A good managed service provider will have a thorough training plan and a budget for each member of staff.



Consider, too, what technology the provider has available to examine issues from an end user perspective. A great deal of the work carried out by managed network operations happens remotely, so it's crucial that they have diagnostic tools and processes to enable them to see problems from your perspective, in order to find the root cause. This might be an investment in the latest networking monitoring software for example, or advanced Wireless network diagnostic tools.

You must also evaluate their customer service skills, and whether they will build good relationships with your staff. Customer satisfaction is about more than metrics, and the importance of having the softer skills and ability to stay calm and put their customers at ease when there is a problem cannot be understated.

3 KPIs and SLAs

This is all about measurements. How does your potential provider track its performance over time, ensure it is keeping its promises to you, and deliver, as far as possible, continual improvement? It needs to have transparent systems in place to record its performance, report it back to you, and benchmark that performance against pre-agreed parameters. Look for a range of tangible performance metrics for measuring service quality in your contract, as well as internal KPIs for keeping engineers working at the highest level. There are two main areas in which your provider

should have a structured KPI system: incident response; and change activity. Incident response is generally about guaranteeing response times for incidents at different levels – a 15-minute response and 90-minute fix for Priority 1 problems, for example. Change activity relates to planned processes like setting up new users or otherwise reworking the network in some way – once again, your provider should have clear limits for how long this should take and how it will be approached. With highly qualified engineers and a good working atmosphere, there is no reason why you should not be able to set and achieve ambitious targets for your SLAs and KPIs.

4 Approach to change management

The holy grail here is a collaborative, agile approach. Being able to smoothly and comprehensively facilitate changes as, for example, new users and applications are added to your network is a crucial capability for an effective managed network operations provider. This depends on being able to accurately model proposed changes *before* they are implemented, so that their implications can be tested without doing any operational damage.

Fortunately, this is an easy factor to test. There are a range of official change management frameworks available, so asking your provider which one(s) they work with should result in a detailed explanation of which they have chosen, why, and how it works in practice. You need to ensure that their chosen strategy can integrate seamlessly with your own, and respond rapidly to any adjustments. Look for a strategy that includes a realistic timeline, rigorous testing, and a comprehensive post change report.

5 Proactivity

A managed network operations provider that sits twiddling its thumbs until a call comes in is a waste of your time and money. Why pay for a service that simply *reacts* to problems on your network when top-quality services will proactively *prevent* many of those problems from occurring in the first place? In turn, this improves your business continuity and

operational efficiency, and frees up resource for more strategic, long-term IT projects.

Look, then, for managed network services providers who have the tools and technology available to proactively highlight infrastructure faults and capacity issues. Look, too, for the ability to deliver historical analysis of performance trends across LANs, WANs, servers, websites, applications and more, so that you can draw intelligent conclusions from past performance and use them to make network enhancements.

By selecting a managed network services provider who ticks all of these boxes, you can be confident of working with a truly long-term partner, who can make a tangible positive impact on your business bottom line. Sure, your provider can just be a safety net for issues as they occur – but why settle for that when true business optimisation is possible?



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www.systal.co.uk
enquiries@systal.co.uk
0330 159 3800