

How a Maintenance Protection Plan Protects You

With the advancements in the latest IP-based phone systems, you may feel that a maintenance protection plan is no longer necessary. But with voice and data residing on the same pipe, a network failure means that everything goes down-making the response time of the vendor responsible for resolving the problem even more critical.

And maintenance agreements provide benefits you may not have considered, such as:

- Parts and Labor Coverage
- Guaranteed Parts Availability
- 24- Hour Help Desk Support
- End-User Training
- Regular Preventative Maintenance
- Regular System Back-ups
- Free or Discounted Programming Services
- CPU Battery Replacement

And today's systems, whether traditional or VoIP, are more software intensive than ever. Most vendors only support customers that stay current with software updates. With many vendors releasing updates every 8-9 months on average, maintenance agreements are usually the most cost effective way to receive those updates. The strongest asset of a maintenance protection plan is the assuredness it can deliver in protecting your critical business communications. Any reputable plan should contain a service level agreement (SLA) to guarantee response times, and the contract should include language regarding parts availability for the systems covered. A good plan will also have provisions for remote monitoring and diagnostics of your system, and should include free training for end users. This last part is very useful in the event of employee turnover, or when new applications are added to your system.

What to look for in an SLA

When negotiating an SLA, there are some very important considerations:ⁱ

- SLAs are always open for negotiations, but only before the purchase. Always look out for your interests during the RFP process, as you may not get a chance later.
- Consider what is really meant by "availability." When an SLA contract specifies a percentage of availability per time period, the total downtime is accumulated over the entire time period. Example: If you sign an annual contract with an SLA of 99%, it means that you won't have more 3.65 days (or 86 hours) of downtime over the entire year, but those 86 hours could happen in one continuous stretch. Now take 99% and apply it on a weekly level. Now, you can't have more than 1.68 hours of downtime on any given day.



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- Don't just define "reaction time," or the time to respond. You also must identify "correction time," to ensure the problem is resolved in a timely manner. Correction time can be broken down further into both workaround time, the time it takes to achieve a temporary solution, and final correction time, the time it takes for a permanent solution. Also, tie reaction, workaround and correction times back to the severity of the problem at hand.
- Define channels of communication and issue escalation clearly, including who is authorized to report problems from your organization and how they should be reported.
- Beware of SLA agreements that apply from the time of issue reporting. This type of agreement will place the burden of monitoring and reporting on the buyer. And always be sure to immediately report the problem to the supplier regardless of the agreement. You can even apply tracking metrics to identify internal lags in communication.
- Define clear measurement and reporting analytics to track system performance and issue resolution. Metrics should include severity of the issue, duration of problem, reaction time and correction time, with all relevant e-mails and messages that were exchanged throughout the encounter.
- Clearly outline penalties in the SLA for downtime outside of what's specified in the SLA and for any other breaches of contract. Always define monetary penalties, as that will "sting" more than if a vendor just provides goods or services to make up for the service issue (goods and services that will cost them significantly less internally).

The right maintenance protection plan is essential to protecting corporate communications. With IP-phones systems unveiling new capabilities seemingly every day, the risk of failure can also grow exponentially. But a maintenance protection plan can be your roadmap to finding a reliable phone system that you can count on.

ⁱ Based on: Spirovski Bozidar, "9 Important Elements in a Service Level Agreement," Articlesbase, (June 4, 2008), <http://www.articlesbase.com/strategic-planning-articles/9-important-elements-in-a-service-level-agreement-438294.html>



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