

## A Maintenance Protection Plan: More Important than Ever

What happens when phones are down:

- Sales inquiries go unanswered.
- Customers do not receive technical support.
- Vendors and partners are frustrated by lack of access.
- Employees are extremely frustrated at their inability to conduct business.

Every business appreciates the importance of their phones, but many feel that with the latest IP-based phone systems, a maintenance protection plan is no longer necessary. This is a very dangerous assumption. An IP system means that voice and data live on the same network. If the network goes down, everything goes down—making the response time of the vendor in resolving the problem even more critical.

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. A maintenance protection plan is also a great way to back-up your entire system and receive regular maintenance calls.

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:<sup>i</sup>

- 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." An SLA with yearly 99% availability can still have over 3 days of downtime over the course of the year. But 99% availability defined by a weekly metric means that you will only have less than 2 hrs of downtime over the course of a week.
- 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. Also, tie reaction and correction times back to the severity of the problem at hand.



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- Define channels of communication and issue escalation clearly, including who is authorized to report problems from your organization and how they should be reported.
- Define clear measurement and reporting analytics to track system performance and issue resolution.
- 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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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