

The CIO Viewpoint

Telecom reliability is vital Networx reflects changing federal needs

By: Mark Zacok

It's been nearly a decade since the General Services Administration awarded its first Federal Telecommunications Systems 2001 contract, and a review of the requirements in the newly minted Networx Universal contract reveals federal telecom network needs have increased exponentially.

When comparing the two multibillion-dollar contracts, we can learn a great deal about the advances in telecom, as well as the government's increased reliability on information technology to fulfill its mission.

Government agencies procure telecommunications services through a variety of acquisition vehicles. The GSA's primary contract vehicle is the Federal Telecommunications Systems 2001 (FTS 2001). Its replacement contract is Networx, a 10-year, \$20 billion governmentwide acquisition contract awarded March 29.

Networx's broad scope reflects the new requirements demanded of 21st century networks. While FTS 2001 included about 30 telecom offerings, Networx delivers nearly 50 services that span myriad voice, video and data applications. Networx adds nine Internet Protocol (IP)-based offerings along with optical, professional and

wireless services. Plus, the vast majority of Networx offerings specify bandwidth rates of at least OC-48 (2.5 gigabits per second).

A second point of difference is the reliability that GSA demands under Networx. FTS 2001's baseline requirement was 99.8 percent telecom network reliability, which equals more than 17 hours of downtime a year. In comparison, Networx allows only five minutes of annual downtime -- "five-nines" reliability (99.999 percent) -- for some services.

The message in Networx is loud and clear when it comes to reliability: Government agencies demand carrier-class service levels of guaranteed "five-nines" reliability. Agencies expect more visibility into network performance, while also requiring strict service level agreements to ensure top network performance and redress if the vendor fails to deliver at acceptable reliability.

Why is downtime such a crucial issue? Through Networx, it's apparent that more agencies are operating voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) networks, putting voice and video on a single data network. Network downtime or degraded performance can now truly paralyze an agency's operations.

Whether it's civilian government, the Defense

Department or the intelligence community, this is an era of bandwidth-hungry applications like on-demand video and imagery. The escalation of data traffic has been extraordinary. For example, in year 2001, voice accounted for 84 percent of total telecom traffic. By fiscal 2006, it was down to 30 percent. Overall traffic (i.e., data and voice) grew 26 percent last year alone, according to market research firm Federal Sources Inc. of McLean, Va.

A third significant difference between the scope of Networx versus FTS 2001 can be traced to the requirements federal agencies have to meet mandates related to continuity of operations. Lessons learned from major natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, as well as more prevalent weather-related issues such as the flooding of the IRS building, point to the need for high performing networks.

As agencies become more reliant on technology, the stakes are higher and more devastating when there are failures. Technology is no longer the province of the chief information officer. Rather, it is a requirement for nearly every government employee to deliver service and fulfill a mission.

While a telecom carrier would lose customers as a result of poorly delivered and unreliable service, federal

managers get unwelcome congressional scrutiny, low worker morale and a loss of productivity.

It's encouraging that GSA considered these issues when defining the requirements in Networx. It carefully evaluated federal agency telecommunications, IT and connectivity needs, evaluated the strengths of the legacy FTS 2001 contract, and then partnered with industry to understand what to include in Networx.

It is very likely that a rival to Networx could emerge during the contract's lifetime. But this is not likely to happen in the near term, only down the road if Networx is not seen as meeting the needs of agencies. In the meantime, federal agency managers whose telecom needs have been satisfied through FTS 2001 will probably transition seamlessly into Networx. For others, choice between full and open competition and Networx is an option.

Federal workers will be the ultimate winners as they will benefit from true carrier-class connectivity and services delivered in Networx.

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