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increased rates of churn.

Launching new products and decommissioning old ones are two other areas where a badly-coordinated system can cause further revenue assurance problems. Businesses often leak money, both by providing incorrect tariffs for new services and by not taking older, more costly products out of service quickly enough.

Proactive or Reactive?

Putting additional systems and checks in place is largely a reactive approach to revenue assurance in a best-of-breed solution. In essence, it is a 'sticking plaster' approach to plugging gaps in the system. Rather than dealing with problems at source, it focuses on putting processes in place which track where revenues are being lost and then trying to correct these errors retrospectively.

As a result, problems can stay hidden for some time and their source is likely to remain unclear. Operators may at first believe that they are suffering either billing or credit management problems. In fact, when they carry out thorough 'root cause analysis', they often discover that the problem is order management-related.

If the system is not proactively managed, a mistake made in the initial order process may not be discovered by the operator for a month or six weeks, when the customer receives their first bill and finds they have been placed on the wrong tariff or are being billed for a service they never received.

In contrast, the best end-to-end pre-integrated solution suites reassure operators that all elements within the product suite will work together in harmony. The holistic approach of these systems is in line with operators' increasing desire to address and monitor the whole lifecycle, from initial order placement through to billing and cash collection.

These solutions also enable operators to be much more proactive. Rather than merely reacting to problems as they occur, seamless connectivity helps to prevent 'gaps' in the system appearing in the first place. In other words, they treat the root cause of the problem rather than the symptoms.

The tight integration of these solutions helps eliminate data replication and synchronisation problems. In addition, embedded workflow and order management functionality allows front-end orders to be successfully transitioned to the back office, ensuring all services can be billed for and eliminating revenue leakage at source.

The pre-integrated nature of these systems allows key business information to be proactively tracked, detailed reports to be generated for each process, revenue leakages rapidly identified and losses minimised. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that ever greater numbers of operators see end-to-end pre-integrated solution suites as a vital weapon in their ongoing battle to achieve genuine revenue assurance.

React to the business need of the customer

The dramatic change in economic outlook has forced all businesses, operators among them, to get back to basics. Many operators are being forced to choose just two or three key projects to focus on for the year and each of those projects has to have an indisputable RoI.

The new economic reality has forced a rationalisation of investment in long-term projects in favour of addressing tangible, immediate business needs — 'quick wins', as well as anything that can fix revenue leakage. And for the longer-term 'big bang' projects that do go ahead, there is a greater push to get better control over the risks associated with it.

In this new environment, opportunities to win a contract to rip and replace a billing system in an established operator are clearly not as common as they were. Likewise, although upgrades are still taking place, the reasons behind the planned upgrade are being questioned more thoroughly, and the project ideally needs to represent a quick win or risk being forced down or off the agenda.

OSS/BSS vendors need to reassess not only the type of solutions they prioritise, but also the cultural attitudes and assumptions that they may have carried over from the 'years of plenty'. The OSS/BSS vendor would, of course, love to offer a major upgrade of the operator's system to address that business need, in the knowledge that it may take many months to implement and bring in major professional services costs for the foreseeable future. But that is unlikely to happen.

An operator's specific business need has to be addressed individually and quickly, without changing what already works just fine in the back-office. The solution does not necessarily need to be within the confines of the existing billing system, nor does it need to be a complete replacement of it. Service providers would be wise to look at solutions that can live alongside the main billing system, and that are agile enough to serve as a 'staging ground', allowing you to react quickly to new business needs as they arise.

An example of this approach is through better policy management. Smart policy management and business control technologies can 'see' relevant information and events on the network and create actions or reactions to a set of circumstances. These technologies can pinpoint the business need and just focus on events on the network which relate to that business need, leaving everything else unrelated to continue as before. It is this ability to just focus on relevant events on the network which means that the business need can be 'ringfenced' and dealt with individually. In this new environment, service providers are starting to see the potential for policy management and business control as a way to focus on solving the business need without time consuming and expensive upgrades.

The opportunity now for the Service Provider community and the OSS/BSS community which serves it, is for us to come through it together stronger and wiser than ever before, with a renewed focus on the fundamentals of business and the drive towards greater profitability.

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