

How to Source the Best Field Force

Expanding into new service or geographic areas can require communications service providers to build or build up a field force. Primarily because it has a substantial labor component, this task can be a financial and management drain, making it ideal for outsourcing.

To find out more about how communications providers should weigh their decision to outsource and what to look for in a provider, xchange consulted Justin McLain, CEO of Endeavor Telecom, a leading provider of outsourced field force services for the telecommunications industry.

McLain has been a critical member of Endeavor's executive management team since 2002, when it was divested from SSI. Previously, he was vice president of sales for SSI, where he provided an array of consulting services to telecommunications companies.

As Endeavor's steward, McLain takes a hands-on approach consulting with key accounts to guide the company's strategic direction and product development.



What types of field service tasks are easily outsourced?

McLain: The best types of outsourced installation and maintenance tasks are those that are easily repeatable and can be executed hundreds or thousands of times. These types of projects provide clear expectations and predictable deliverables, which are associated with scaling a project to many, if not all, of an end-user's locations.

Classic examples include extending demarcation points on new circuits, connecting premise equipment to inside wiring, installing PoS and kiosk-based equipment, and installing VPNs and other managed services. Other examples are specific services, such as T1 and xDSL lines for dedicated Internet access, voice and data service circuits, VPNs, SIP trunking and hosted PBX offerings. What these all have in common is they can be easily defined in a statement of work and charged at a flat installation rate regardless of the geographic location.

What are the benefits to service providers offering enhanced professional installations?

McLain: We all know that traditional access has become a commodity and that the new "gold rush" is in adopting managed services as a component of the service provider's business model. Extending demarcs and installing equipment are just the necessary elements of a service provider turning up service on a new circuit. But there is a great deal more on the table.

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Let me explain: End users are already accustomed to paying other vendors for installing the services that operate on the access medium, and service providers can easily mask the cost of the access installation in their integration work. This not only simplifies matters for the end user, it also provides incremental revenue to the service provider on the managed services required to power the applications.

How can a carrier ensure quality control when outsourcing customer-facing tasks?

McLain: The most important aspects of quality assurance in respect to field service are the SLA, real-time status and reporting, the field engineers' knowledge and ability to complete the work, and clear and concise communication of the expected procedures and outcomes for each dispatch.

Many organizations may see fit to subcontract jobs through other national providers, who sub to regional organizations, who sub to local affiliates, who in turn sub to an individual contractor. This adds so many layers of profit-taking, and unnecessary distillations of instructions for the tech. Instead, look for a company that maintains direct control over each individual performing the work.

You also should expect your outsourcer to meet a mutually agreed-upon SLA. Endeavor's, for example, encompasses on-time arrival, staff appearance procedures that enhance a service provider's brand, as well as the quality and workmanship at the premise. Every Endeavor representative personally downloads work orders and calls into the TAC upon arrival, and before leaving. Additionally, detailed procedures, onsite checklists and a comprehensive close-out process ensure successful completion of all work orders.

Look for a qualified technical staff. Endeavor requires each of its 9,000-plus field engineers to be certified and conducts extensive background checks on both its 350 direct techs and subcontractors.

How might a service provider test the waters to become comfortable with outsourcing?

McLain: Outside of the obvious, such as conducting extensive due diligence, there are a number of useful ways to test the waters. Here are a few I would recommend:

- Limit the scope of projects to a few hundred sites to get comfortable before committing to a larger engagement.
- Farm out particular products from your portfolio — perhaps T1 router installations or VoIP-based initiatives — as test cases before expanding to other products and services from there.
- Select a geographic area — perhaps outside your local market or a new market where you are attempting to grow your business.
- Seek help only with problematic clients or intricate installations that are beyond your in-house skill set.

Whatever the case, there are several ways to evaluate outsourced services. The review of SLAs, the assessment of customer feedback, and the measurable impact on the bottom line provide a wealth of data that service providers can use to determine if, where, and when it makes sense to further leverage outsourced services as part of their business model.