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Getting a Handle On Handhelds

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If you're responsible for managing wireless devices, you know that it's like trying to hit a moving target. Wireless deployments are expanding at a rapid pace as wireless spending is becoming a much larger portion of corporate telecom expenses. By some estimates, the cost will increase fivefold within three years.

It used to be that only a few key individuals were authorized to carry company-paid devices such as cell phones and pagers. Now there's an epidemic deployment of a larger group of wireless devices, including BlackBerries, handhelds, WAN cards and others. And the notion of who qualifies as "key personnel" has ballooned.

From a corporate perspective, this makes sense: Studies show that wireless deployments have produced double-digit improvements in productivity and profitability. So it's worth giving someone a device and paying the total cost of ownership — which could add up to \$1,500 annually (or much more, in some cases) — to get the productivity benefits.

But introducing new pieces of equipment and associated expenses also means they need to be managed. Managing stationary equipment, such as desktop PCs, is standard practice. Trying to manage an inventory of portable devices that is not only increasing but also changing from day to day is a different story. Now factor in all the special features of the wireless world — such as number portability, warranty exchanges, loaner devices, spare pools and user swap-outs — plus the need to accommodate personal preferences and decide what to do when employees are terminated. Making sure that end users are satisfied is important, but the challenge really lies in keeping

track of who has what.

When most companies realize they need to get control of their wireless inventory, they usually take the path of least resistance and rely on the carriers to tell them what they have.

This "fox in the henhouse" approach may provide some relief, but do you really want to rely on the carrier, whose goal is to sell as many devices as possible? Personal experience shows that carrier invoicing is typically off by 7% to 20%. Is this who you want managing your inventory?

The best-in-class companies take a strong stand on managing wireless services. They look to maintain a knowledge base of what they have (the inventory), the usage of their devices (such as minutes consumed), and the best technology and business practices. They know that solid inventory management is key to having visibility into expenses. This becomes critical to having accurate data to validate monthly bills from the carriers.

If you have responsibility for your company's wireless devices and services, consider a comprehensive wireless management approach to avoid losing control. There are two options: Either develop an in-house capability where you assemble trained staff along with software tools for inventory and optimization, or outsource the function to a telecommunications expense management service provider that handles wireless services.

A comprehensive wireless management approach provides expense management, visibility, standardization and improved service to users.

The right tools open the doors to auditing, inventory-to-billing reconciliation, service optimization, carrier and contract leveraging, budget-forecasting metrics,

and centralized protocols and policies.

Even having good practices doesn't ensure 100% accurate inventory. The nature of the wireless business is that there are constant "moves, adds and changes." You'll need other checks and balances to keep the inventory clean. For example, with proper oversight, you can identify lines that may have no activity. Suppose a user ported his personal number onto the corporate device he was given. If the original line on the corporate device wasn't canceled, you'd get bills for both. The only way this would be noticed is if a monthly usage analysis were conducted, at which point you would know to cancel it.

Other checks that can be done include an analysis of the inventory against your active employee list. Any unidentified devices that still can't be nailed down can always be contacted, either by phone call or text message, to see if they should remain on your inventory.

For some companies, wireless devices and carrier services are a multi-million-dollar annual expense. Isn't it prudent to have visibility into and control over such a large recurring expense? Ultimately, the savings from proper management of your wireless devices and services will far outweigh the cost of doing it right.

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