The Holy Grail of Network Service Quality

By: **Andy Everest**

While digital transformation quietly began to take hold around 30 years ago with the introduction of computerized procedures and automated operations, it's really picked up steam over the last five years. Now, every enterprise is embarking on some kind of digital transformation in the quest for improved performance, monitoring and security—and, all the while, feverishly trying to maintain cost efficiency. Digital technology and the cloud have transformed the way businesses are run and connect with their employees, suppliers, partners, and customers—across sites and geographies—but these critical business applications that are so central to that transformation require huge amounts of bandwidth.
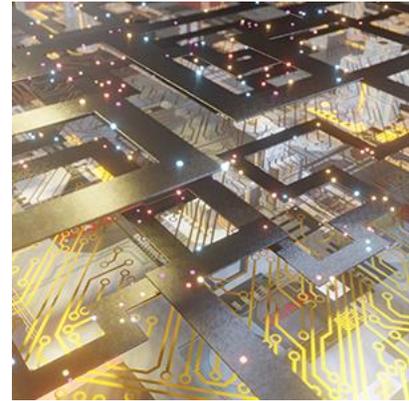
To support this demand, a large proportion of enterprises rely on the public Internet for some or all of their wide-area network services. Yet, when we asked in 2020 as to their opinion of their network provider, only 51 percent rated their current suppliers as 'great' for customer experience, with 45 percent saying failure to provide fast solutions for simple problems was their biggest issue, and 27 percent indicating that the struggle to find information and support bothered them most.

With network transformation so evidently a linchpin in the success of digital transformation, there has clearly been a shortfall in the provisioning of service quality.

The quest for quality

The word 'quality' is often used in the telecom industry. However, it is an elusive concept and somewhat difficult to define. Is it purely subjective and based on gut feeling? Or something that can be objectively measured and followed up with figures and key performance indicators (KPIs)?

Either way, it can have major implications for network buyers, so we decided to take a closer look at the concept of network quality and carried out a new survey entitled "The Quest for Network Quality in 2022." In the first half of 2022, we surveyed senior decision-makers involved in their company's choice of network provider across four of the world's biggest markets—the US, the UK, Germany, and France—to explore further how enterprise leaders view the quality of their network providers and the services that they offer.

The trust factor

Business leaders stated that the top three buying criteria for choosing a network operator are trustworthiness, professionalism, and experience—which is especially the case in the Anglosphere (the UK and the US), where trustworthiness is valued over professionalism.

Leaders were asked which experiences would have the most negative impact on their perception of service quality from their current operator. Not surprisingly, over a third (34 percent) cite repeated network failings. This is followed closely by dishonesty at 27 percent. When it comes to specific countries, however, 31 percent of US leaders say that they are most adversely affected by unresponsive customer service.

Communication is key

Interestingly, while business leaders rank trustworthiness, professionalism, and experience as the top reasons for selecting a network operator, 64 percent of respondents said that communication is by far the prime practical quality required (versus network speed that garnered just 36 percent of the vote). In addition, a resounding 84 percent of decision-makers believed it should always be possible to speak with a customer services person without using chatbots or automated phone lines. In the US, 90 percent of leaders were adamant about this. Sixty-two percent of US respondents were also markedly ahead of their UK, French, and German counterparts when it comes to insisting that the first contact is with someone who is technically qualified to solve their problem.

When asked whether having a local (in the respondents' own country) network provider representative improves overall service quality, 87 percent of leaders agree or strongly agree that it does. This view is particularly strongly felt by decision-makers in the US (95 percent) and France (92 percent) but is of markedly less importance in Germany (74 percent).

Top teams

Unsurprisingly, overall network performance is the area of most importance for business leaders with over two-thirds (67 percent) claiming to have replaced their provider due to poor quality. When it comes to the responses from the different markets, US decision-makers again stand out as the most likely to change provider over quality issues (72 percent), followed by Germany (68 percent). However, a surprisingly high proportion of respondents (68 percent) admitted to making the change due to a poor relationship with their account manager, with less than a third

choosing to just change the representative. US leaders (77 percent) are particularly prone to pulling the trigger in this way. The findings strongly suggest that network providers must get the appointment of their account managers right, as they can make or break the customer-vendor relationship regardless of how an operator might be meeting its service-level-agreement (SLA) obligations.

Faith in SLAs

When asked whether having a watertight SLA guarantees a great operator experience, leaders overwhelmingly agree (84 percent) that it does. Interestingly, however, while 68 percent of all decision-makers surveyed (up to 80 percent in the US) regard them as a useful quality assurance mechanism, almost a third (30 percent) view them as a necessary formality with no tangible impact on service quality.

Mapping the performance against the SLAs as part of their quality assurance routines, almost half of the respondents said that they follow-up on their supplier SLAs on a weekly basis with 29 percent of decision-makers in the US opting for daily checks.

Getting network service quality right

As the importance of network transformation becomes more recognized as a key part of the overall digital transformation strategies with which so many organizations are grappling, it's clear that network service quality is vitally important, and network buyers are prepared to pay for it.

That said, assessing the overall quality of experience can be a challenge. A simple desktop comparison of various KPIs isn't sufficient, and a holistic assessment—including a review of less-tangible parameters—is necessary. From the results of our research, a number of recommendations can be made for prospective network buyers looking to secure the best possible network service quality.

Trust your instincts

In our report, we found that decision-makers trust their own research more than any other source and should use their own instincts and insights throughout the buying cycle. Additionally, previous experience of a particular vendor as well as reliable recommendations from a third party or even try-before-you buy opportunities are all beneficial tactics in selecting a network provider.

Choose wisely

Trustworthiness and transparency are overwhelming priorities for most respondents when they define network provider quality. On the flip side, repeated network failings, followed by dishonesty, have the most negative impact on the perception of operator quality. Network buyers should take extra steps to source network providers with a track record of trustworthiness

and transparency, including a thorough and critical review of sales pitches, vendor references, and case studies during the procurement process itself.

The personal touch

The vast majority of network buyers want to speak to an expert on first contact, and most will replace their provider if they have a poor relationship with an account manager. Strong personal relationships with network providers should therefore be prioritized. Survey respondents felt that overall service quality is improved if there is a local network provider representative. The importance of securing a network supplier with a local, in-country sales representative or operational interface should not be underestimated.

SLA security

The majority of business leaders in the survey regard SLAs as a useful mechanism for securing network quality once they have onboarded a provider. Most believe that a watertight SLA guarantees a great operator experience, and the majority of respondents follow up on SLAs on a weekly basis. Network buyers should therefore ensure that they secure a strong SLA from the outset.

Don't cut corners

It is generally agreed that "Quality is remembered long after price is forgotten," and our research revealed that nearly all (93 percent) are prepared to pay a premium for a provider that delivers a high-quality network experience. Remember, it is more costly to manage poor quality in the long run—particular attention should be paid to a prospective provider's implementation and delivery team.

Overall, there is a great deal more to quality than just SLAs, and all factors can have major implications for network buyers. In the end, speaking subjectively or objectively, it all comes down to network providers delivering quality—in its broadest sense.

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