Cisco IP phone failure causes chaos

TELECOMMS > By Lisa Kelly [07 Dec 2000]

The world's second largest internet telephony network, provided by Cisco Systems, failed in the middle of a child abuse crisis with "life or death" implications for children.

The system was built for the New Zealand government at a cost of $2.8m. Cisco provided its Avvid architecture products for the IP-based voice, video and data network connecting 8000 IP phones in more than 200 government offices. The network was designed to handle 120,000 to 160,000 calls a day.

It was installed this autumn but in September the system cracked under the strain from callers concerned about possible child abuse. Technical problems included calls breaking off half way through, message systems not working and calls going to the wrong person.

Letters from the heads of New Zealand government departments, made public under the country's Official Information Act, revealed the failings, according to reports by the New Zealand Press Association.

Jackie Brown, chief executive at the Child, Youth and Family Services department, one of the two departments that used the network, wrote to the Social Policy Ministry, which managed the project, outlining "significant risks" to child safety and the department's credibility. The letter also referred to political and industrial risks from the failing system.

Child safety workers, including police, teachers and health workers, were unable to reach the department, and Brown said that the phone system made for "an unsafe environment for the child protection system in this country at a time when we are facing a significant increase in demand".

A Ministry official acknowledged that missed calls could prove to be "life or death situations".

In a separate letter to a New Zealand newspaper, Christine Rankin, chief of the Department of Work and Income, also a user of the system, reported that people could not contact the department and said that huge areas of the country were subjected to total phone outages. "Staff now have a perception that we have been sold another pup," she wrote.

The Ministry said that the problems have been addressed and that the network is now handling around 750,000 calls a week. Cisco was unable to provide comment in time.

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