



WINDSTREAM

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO EVALUATING NETWORK SERVICES



Savvy organizations know carriers and high-end service providers offer all kinds of network services options. But how can they decide what services they need, and who is best qualified to deliver them? **As always, the devil lurks in the details, ready to pounce on the unwary or under-informed. This step-by-step guide will inform buyers about those details** and make sure they're well prepared to ask for exactly what they need.

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NETWORK SERVICES: SETTING THE STAGE

To begin the acquisition process, organizations must first look inward. They must understand their business and network needs: past, present and future. This means carefully examining how they use their existing network. Then documenting the usage and bandwidth consumption data and illustrating how those metrics vary over time. For example, many businesses experience seasonal peaks in activity, while others fluctuate based on fiscal reporting. It's essential to capture these peaks and valleys to be prepared the next time they occur.

Networking stands on the underlying infrastructure, so it's also important to document your current architecture, including network layout, with all sites, links and elements captured and clearly mapped. You'll want to include any gaps in design, as well as plans for growth. Any major change to your forecast for the coming 12 to 36 months will need to be addressed in forward-looking service delivery plans and related SLAs. This also includes changes in your application roadmap, or new lines of business visible on the horizon. If your IT organization includes an architecture practice, you should work with them to obtain all of the information that will be needed along the way.

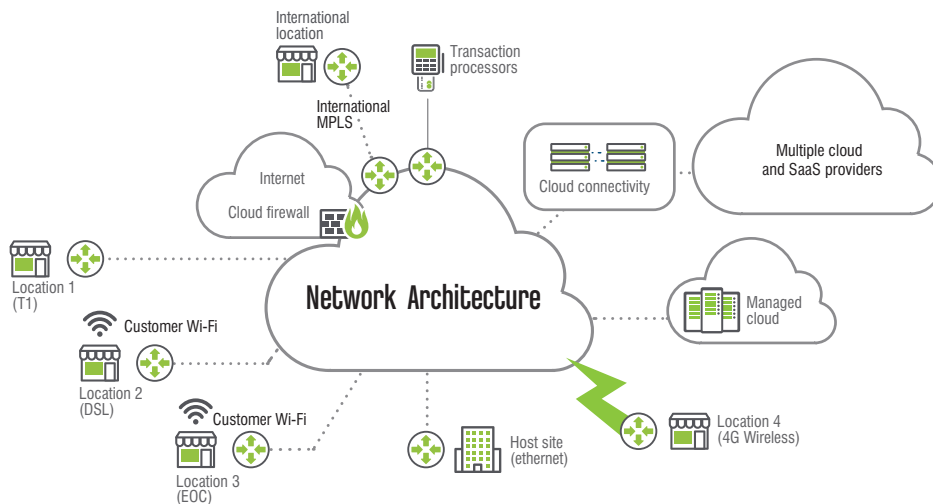
The objective is to understand your overall business needs for networking and the services the network provides. You'll want to collect answers to all of these questions as you prepare to look outside your organization for a partner to help address them.

ULTIMATELY, YOUR GOAL IS TO PRODUCE A NETWORK ASSESSMENT DOCUMENT

The resulting assessment will capture and represent the current state and architecture of what you have, how you're using it now, and what it needs to do tomorrow. It should document gaps in your current environment, open issues and outright needs. If you are aware of missing features that aren't critical, but qualify as "nice-to-have," you'll want to capture them, too.

It's essential for the assessment to capture targets for growth, expansion and implementation of new applications and services essential to your business objectives. The end result should document your network architecture with features and functions clearly spelled out, including security, compliance and connectivity, as well as a calendar-based estimate for seasonal resource consumption.

A THOROUGH SCHEMATIC ILLUSTRATING YOUR CURRENT ARCHITECTURE HELPS SET THE STAGE FOR EVALUATING NETWORK SERVICES. FOR EXAMPLE:





CALLING ON A CONSULTANT

Telecom or network agents, consultants or brokers understand needs from both a business and technology perspective. They can work with master agents who represent entire industry sectors or lines of business to help identify providers you wish to approach. Expect to pay a small percent of the contract by way of a fee, or to negotiate a reasonable fixed price for this service. It's reasonable to ask them to read and interpret your specifications and provide a list of up to seven candidates to approach for analysis. This can shorten the initial RFP/RFQ submission to prospective players most likely to meet your needs. It's smart to focus on industry or vertical specialists who know your business. They will understand your matrix weighting values and can provide feedback on your decisions.

LET THE BUYING PROCESS BEGIN

Once you've created your network assessment, you can take it to potential providers to get the ball rolling. You may want to consider hiring or engaging an agent or consultant to help match your requirements with suitable providers (see sidebar: Calling on a consultant). These people know the market well and are attuned to needs and requirements characteristic of specific industries and types of organizations.

After you identify potential providers, the next step is **to solicit proposals to explain how their offerings and services meet your needs** as spelled out in your network assessment. Before focusing on price, it's essential to look for the closest match between your architecture and what the provider brings to the table. This is the best way to ensure a proper fit between business requirements and partner capabilities.

Ultimately, you'll receive a proposal or quote from those providers who decide to respond in light of your request and assessment. It's critical to examine and evaluate SLAs that emerge from provider proposals because they'll help guide your overall rating and ranking of those responses and the parties that deliver them.

CREATING A MATRIX FOR RATING AND RANKING

Once you start collecting responses, you should establish a weighted matrix to compare options. The categories for these won't change much but their weights will vary depending on your priorities and needs and the market(s) in which you compete. These categories should include:

- **Architecture features and functions:** Clearly stated specifications and requirements for network services that include bandwidth, connection types, locations, protocols and services required, availability, uptime and response time.
- **Security:** Security policies and applicable regulatory or compliance regimes that will guide security requirements. Be sure to communicate these in detail and to vet all related responses.
- **Price:** Be sure to flesh out all recurring and annual charges, fees and contract renewal charges. Establish a complete and accurate picture of how much you must pay or spend, how often and when.



"DO-IT-YOURSELF" OR HIRE A PRO? CREATING AN ARCHITECTURE SPECIFICATION

If your organization already hosts an architecture group, it's entirely within its realm to assist or drive the creation of design specifications. Communications architect will be best to spearhead such an effort. Whether you use internal or external resources, you'll want to work with them to perform a thorough review of your current architecture, gaps and challenges, plus plans for future growth and expansion. Then you can work together to make sure your specification addresses both current and planned needs for bandwidth, utilization, connectivity and service levels. The end result will serve you in many ways, because a rigorous architecture is still the best way to drive technology acquisition to best serve business objectives.

- **Operational excellence or provider reputation:** Each provider's dedication to operational excellence will be reflected in its market reputation. Be sure to consult third-party rating services, talk to reference customers in your industry and search the Internet for rankings, reputation data, and complaints or issues.
- **Roll-out and implementation capabilities:** Can the provider deliver test lab access to tools and technologies before roll-out for proof of concept and architecture verification? Do they have verifiable experience in deploying and rolling out similar configurations in the field and in your industry? It's absolutely essential to be sure the vendor can provide proper and timely roll-out and implementation assistance on your timetable, at your locations, within budget.
- **Consulting and professional services:** Do they offer consulting services to aid design and integration, or training to bring your own staff up to speed? A good provider can do some of these things some of the time; a great one will bend over backwards to do them all.

Weighting the matrix cells is as much art as it is science and will depend on specific sensitivities for your business or industry. Thus, a real estate property management company might be willing to delay or defer deployment to save on up-front costs and accept higher latency, reduced availability and response time to reduce recurring charges. Alternatively, a financial services company might require minimal latency no matter what the cost and likewise, demand high-availability and rapid response time to ensure fast, accurate and verifiable trades.

The differences are important, given real estate is price sensitive and time insensitive, whereas financial services is time sensitive and price insensitive. You'll need to adjust weights in the matrix to match your situation and identify what's best for you.

CREATING THE SHORT LIST, THEN NARROWING YOUR CHOICES

The outcome of your vendor comparison matrix should guide you to a short list of the most qualified contenders, if not to a clear winner. Within the reduced scope of a handful of contenders, additional steps are worth undertaking to identify your best choice. These include:

- Assess brand recognition and value
- Consult with peers
- Determine the provider's profile for service delivery, support and customer orientation
- Overall assessed value for provider offerings, coupled with their ability to create and maintain an enduring, positive partnership

In the end, your goal is to choose just one great partner. If you follow these steps to their logical conclusions, you'll greatly improve your odds of making the best possible choice.



SELECTING A PROVIDER FOR NEW GENERATION OF SERVICES: SD-WAN

Networks are entering a time of significant change, as bandwidth demands continue to outpace budgets. Luckily, a new technology has emerged to address this challenge. SD-WAN leverages multiple connections like a hybrid network, adding a layer of intelligence for real-time visibility and control over application performance. This creates major improvements in performance, bandwidth and user experience, and major reductions in cost per megabit. Evaluating SD-WAN providers requires additional scrutiny, because few Network Service Providers have relevant long-term experience yet. It's best to look at overall measures of excellence, existing managed services, reputation and satisfaction levels for implementation, service and support.

WINDSTREAM SD-WAN CONCIERGE™

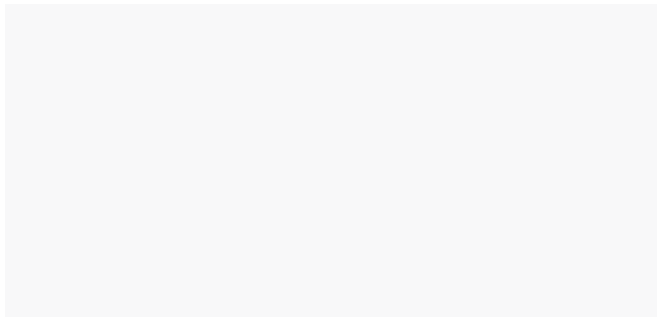
Windstream has always been known for providing excellent support, but our SD-WAN Concierge takes this to the next level and removes the IT complexities typically associated with maintaining a business network. When you purchase an SD-WAN Concierge solution, you're teamed with an expert Technical Program Manager who works closely with you during their initial implementation to design and build a solution optimized to meet your unique needs. This includes creating and deploying business, application routing and security policies.

From there, an Assigned Technical Service Manager provides you with ongoing guidance. Backed by our 24/7 support team, we work with you to understand your specific business needs. We'll provide proactive alerts about how new and existing applications are consuming bandwidth and recommend updates for business and application policies to optimize your performance accordingly.

This hands-on approach makes SD-WAN Concierge Service ideal for SMB organizations who want to maximize ROI while minimizing the administrative burden, and who seek to leverage their network to be more competitive and agile and deliver a better customer experience than ever before.

FREE DEMO AVAILABLE

Contact us for more information



OUR PROMISE TO YOU

With one of the nation's largest fiber networks, 147,000 miles and growing, Windstream is committed to helping you grow, manage and optimize your network with innovative technologies that enable you to manage costs and make the most of your existing investments. We are dedicated to delivering an exceptional customer experience through our network, our solutions and our people.

