

Case Study: Sub Loop Unbundling

Smart use of SLU keeps Call Flow ahead of the pack

Sub Loop Unbundling (SLU) has been around for a while, but it's safe to say that some communications providers have struggled to make it work for them. That's definitely not the case with Call Flow Solutions, a Kent based CP, which has grasped the opportunity offered by SLU after completing a hugely successful pilot. The company is now in the middle of two more SLU rollouts, with even more on the horizon. So what's the secret of Call Flow's success?

Call Flow provides telecoms, internet, wireless solutions and Voice over IP using wholesale line rental (WLR) to provide its customers with a bundled package including lines, calls, PBX and broadband.

But it's the move into SLU that's really seen the company take off. Managing Director Andy Conibere explains how the opportunity came about: "We spoke with our Openreach Sales and Relationship Manager about a business opportunity to provide broadband services to outlying rural areas.

"The area in question, West Malling, was actually very densely populated with four cabinets covering 90 per cent of the houses."

SLU was the obvious product to underpin the project, although it was still a somewhat risky move, given the impending availability of competing broadband services in the area. But the pilot, which involved unbundling the four cabinets in West Malling, proved to be a roaring success and Andy is confident that Call Flow can carve out similar opportunities elsewhere.

The initial four cabinets of the West Malling pilot project currently serve over 200 lines – with another 5-8 lines being added every week. By summer 2011 Call Flow should have more than 300 SLU lines in place in the pilot area alone.

"The pilot has been phenomenal," says Andy. "We've now won other local authority grants on the back of its success so we find ourselves as the frontrunners for other communities with similar issues. We're currently in the middle of two new projects in Swanley and Knockholt following an agreement with Kent County Council to provide broadband to a further two cabinets in the area. We're also very optimistic of being awarded the projects to do a further four or five cabinets in East Sussex in the near future."

Getting in the mix

Andy puts this success down to teamwork – both in terms of the mix of skills and experience in-house and the relationship Call Flow has established with Openreach.

"It's a bit of a fortunate situation for us. We find ourselves with just the right mix of skills and expertise, despite being quite a small company, to take advantage of SLU."

Since being established in 2003, the company has seen its areas of expertise develop around five key areas:

1. PBX and IP phone systems, broadband and telephones
2. IT service – servers and networks
3. Managed office space
4. Broadband over radio (WISP)
5. Wholesale line rental and call minutes

Call Flow can draw on the wide knowledge of its engineers to design all the complex aspects of the solution, while Andy (a former BT engineering manager) brings in his own experience of the BT network. It is this combination of skills and experience that enables Call Flow to really get to grips with planning and implementing SLU.

"You compare this with smaller companies which don't have the required technical knowledge in-house and large companies which approach this area too theoretically and spend too much time in the planning cycle. We don't have that luxury, we just get on with it."

And things seem to have worked out just right. In fact, in terms of customers, Call Flow is now one of the largest SLU providers in the UK*. No mean feat, considering the company has reached this position only eight months after it started to build this solution.

"We're currently a relatively small communications provider, but we take a pragmatic approach. We understand that the real world throws up challenges and problems – we want to overcome problems and we'll work with anyone who can help us get the job done."

Keeping everyone in the loop

This approach has seen Call Flow work really closely with Openreach to ensure everything goes as smoothly as possible. But that doesn't mean it's all been plain sailing.

"Of course we've had problems along the way, but while some companies might immediately throw their hands up and blame others, we understand that people don't intentionally do the wrong thing. We don't want to adopt a confrontational stance because it doesn't help our business or customers."

"The key is understanding. We've developed a mutual understanding and trust with the people we rely on in Openreach. We know we can share ideas with them and help improve the products they provide us with."

Fergus Crockett, Openreach's Product Director, reinforced this view: "We're delighted to have developed such a constructive relationship with Call Flow; SLU is part of a wide package of wholesale products which CPs wishing to offer super-fast broadband services to their customers can choose from, and we're pleased that Call Flow have taken full advantage of that choice to grow their business."

Going forward, Andy is already considering the opportunities offered by new Openreach products such as Duct and Pole sharing, and Call Flow has already signed up to trial this – potentially providing access to an even wider market. Call Flow will also continue to seize opportunities provided by local authority funding to use SLU to spread high-speed broadband throughout the South-East.

Fergus continued: "We're committed to working closely with Call Flow and our other CP customers to ensure that they can utilise all routes to market, and offer compelling solutions to their end-user customers, whether this be via SLU, GEA, or our new Passive products. These are exciting times for our industry, and we intend to reinforce our position as the infrastructure provider of choice for communications providers."

For more information on Sub Loop Unbundling please visit www.openreach.co.uk or contact your Sales and Relationship Manager.

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