4 Network Update Best Practices to Avoid Downtime and Disruption

The network forms the backbone of business productivity, connecting workers with the resources they need to do their jobs. This complex system affects everyone in the office, as well as most business practices. Consequently, when the system needs upgrading, implementing network update best practices proves critical.

Things that Can Go Wrong

Because the network reaches into every facet of IT infrastructure and impacts every user, the update process brings significant potential for disruption. Understanding what can go wrong and planning accordingly can save the day.

For instance, an update to any piece of the network can affect other areas with unexpected consequences. Upgrading a switch or installing a software patch may cause outdated components elsewhere in the system to fail. Likewise, connecting solutions piecemeal from various vendors can cause issues and prompt maintenance difficulties.

On the other hand, trying to address too many updates at once can cause problems of its own. Network updates will generally involve some downtime, and limiting that downtime is crucial. Bringing large portions of the system to a halt for hours or days during peak productivity times severely impacts business processes.

Additionally, any network upgrade needs to account for future growth and ongoing changes in the environment. Make sure that the updates made will support the demands of the devices and applications that will run on the system. The network configuration that served five years ago will fail under increased demands from a hybrid workforce and bandwidth-hungry tools.

Network Update Best Practices

1. Know the Environment

Before embarking on any network update, make a detailed study of the existing environment and future needs. Start with a site survey to determine the current lay of the land. Know the number of users and types of devices that connect to the network. Document application requirements and map out the current network infrastructure.

In addition, outline the requirements for the system moving forward. This includes new services and applications that will be added. It also involves discovering security vulnerabilities and regulatory issues that need addressing. Other considerations include expected growth in personnel, devices, and office locations, as well as projected changes in business processes.

2. Prioritize

Updating an entire network at once can prove both problematic and costly. Instead, plan a staggered approach, upgrading components in small chunks to avoid bringing the whole system down. This necessarily involves a process of prioritization. Identify areas that need upgrading and the reason for the update.

For instance, consider the problem areas. What elements of the network present the most vulnerabilities? Aging network components may be limiting capacity, impacting security, or halting productivity.

3. Prepare a Detailed Strategy

With an understanding of the environment and a priority list in hand, you can begin to prepare a strategy. And the better the plan, the higher the success rate. A good network update plan will include at least the following:

- Capacity planning – Structure the network for the growth of tomorrow, rather than the needs of today. Estimate growth in staff and number of devices, expected changes to the business and so forth.

- Build security into the process – Resist the temptation to prioritize upgrade speed over security. Use security best practices from the beginning.

- Strive for a consistent approach – Mixing and matching technologies leads to problems down the road. Instead of cobbling together a solution made of cheapest options, pick a reputable vendor and stick with them.

- Establish a detailed plan and timeline – Determine and document a rollout strategy that balances speed with risk mitigation. Identify points of no return along the way.

- Have a rollback strategy, just in case – Hopefully, the upgrade will run smoothly. But in case the unexpected happens, and the upgrade fails, have a plan outlined for rolling back the changes.

4. Communicate and Document

Because a network update affects so many people and systems, pay close attention to communication and documentation. Have a plan in place for communicating problems and escalating issues. Know where the buck stops for each part of the strategy. Clearly communicate timelines and expectations to end users. Additionally, document every step of the way, from site survey through post-upgrade maintenance procedures.

Expert Partners Ensure Network Update Best Practices

Network updates involve significant complexity, with potential roadblocks at every turn. Joining forces with network experts helps to ensure a smooth process and a network that will support current and future needs well. The network specialists at eMazzanti know how critical your network is to your business. From network mapping and documentation to ongoing monitoring, we bring the tools and expertise you need.