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School's out for billing

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Already providing Centrex service to Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Ill., Consolidated Communications had the opportunity to expand that deal to include new voice-over-IP services. The problem: EIU wanted to do its own billing, which meant that data coming out of Consolidated's Genband softswitch just wouldn't do.

It was an interesting dilemma, said Gregg Hope, product manager for the independent telco, which serves both residential and business customers in Illinois, Pennsylvania and Texas. Not only did Consolidated not want to lose existing business, but the migration to VoIP held the potential to cover much more of the campus, including student rooms.

Consolidated considered building a data translation capability itself but decided instead to seek a commercial solution, looking at several vendors before turning to Equinox Information Systems, with which Consolidated had an existing relationship. It turned out that Equinox's TeleLink mediation system would serve its purposes well. The system mediates, or translates, customer data records from out of the VoIP softswitch and transforms them into a format that can be consumed by the university's own billing systems.

Using TeleLink, which typically is deployed as a revenue assurance platform, in this type of billing record mediation "is not unheard of, but it's not necessarily all that common, either," said David West, executive vice president for Equinox. "You see it a lot in a wholesale environment, where a carrier's carrier customer wants to see billing records in a particular format."

Equinox worked with Consolidated and EIU to determine the information needs on both sides of the billing equation and created maps to ensure the university ended up with the data it needed. The solution also provided Consolidated with auditing and reporting capabilities — including alerts of problems — so the telco can oversee the data exchange process.

Driving this data mediation solution is a data warehouse that stores all details of every customer record that Consolidated's softswitch spits out. For now, the telco simply dips in and pulls out the university's CDRs.

But that data warehouse also holds the potential to support other applications, as Consolidated serves more customers via its VoIP infrastructure.

"That's the beauty of this," West said. "They were able to get their [return on investment] from a single application and a single customer win, but they now have a record of every call made off that switch in a data warehouse. Now that they've got that data, there are lots of other things they can do with it, including revenue assurance, vendor reconciliation and more."

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