

Author

Mike Gilmore

Senior Partner of The Cabling Partnership (www.it-cabling.com)
Managing Director of e-Ready Building Limited
P.O.Box MT65, Leeds, United Kingdom. LS17 8YD.
e-mail: mike.gilmore@btinternet.com
Telephone: +44 (0) 113 232 3721, Fax: +44 (0) 113 293 2632

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The IT cabling infrastructure
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e-Ready Building Limited

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CABLE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS – A BIG “CON” OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD

by
**Mike Gilmore, Technical Director of the FIA
for Networking+ (December 2007)**

As FIA Technical Director, I have received a growing number of negative comments on the operation of cabling administration tools. These are the software products used to record the connections within cabling infrastructures and manage works instructions for adds, moves and changes. They are commonly, but inaccurately, described as “cable management systems” and range from simple spreadsheets through to fully intelligent packages that automatically monitor the disconnection and reconnection of equipment/ patch cords.

The growth in the number of critical comments is not necessarily surprising because there are now more products on the market and there are more users. It is a competitive market and there are obviously going to be some users who are dissatisfied.

However, what is interesting is that the complaints do not focus on the operation of the software but tend to be about the failure of the organisations that have purchased the software to truly benefit from it. Users have the feeling that they have squandered the money invested. However, a deeper investigation of the problems frequently reveals that the underlying concern is that the customers feel that they cannot rely on the information that is recorded.

The fundamental problem is that, almost without exception, even the most intelligent management systems can be tricked either by using non-compliant cords or undertaking works instructions in a non-complaint sequence. These two problems are in fact, just one - the use of incompetent staff or the allowance of unauthorised personnel to make changes to the networked infrastructure.

At the heart of the problem is that, prior to the purchase of “cable management systems”, the customer has confused “administration systems” with “administration tools”. The software packages, simple or sophisticated, are just tools. Any subsequent problems result from the failure of the management systems employed using those tools - and not from the failure of the tools.

This is just a restatement of the old adage “you can take a horse to water”.

Infrastructure management is a serious business and its importance is growing as more general security concerns increase. The unauthorised and unrecorded diversion of networking connections can result from many reasons including an individual's desire to obtain a service to which they are not entitled, to correct a local breakdown in service and even sabotage. An organisation has to decide which, if any, of the possible reasons for such changes can be allowed, and supported, and which cannot - on “pain of death” for the culprit.

Systems need to be enacted to restrict such activities that are not acceptable and to make obvious the occasions on which the remaining unauthorised changes have been made. Obvious procedures would control the access of personnel to “comms rooms” while less obvious procedures would include the provision of clearly identifiable products to allow specific types of unauthorised changes to be made - i.e. supporting a recognised risk of administration failure.

Cabling administration standards have always differentiated “identifiers” from “labels”. People are only just realising that it may not be a good idea for a label to show networking information (e.g. where the other end of a cable is). Similarly, it has never been a good idea for a cable to be labelled with its end-points - even though the identifier relating to that label (only seen by the administrator) would do so.

The Cabling Partnership
P. O. Box MT 65, LEEDS, West Yorkshire, LS17 8YD, England
Telephone: +44 (0) 113 232 3721 Fax: +44 (0) 113 293 2632

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Company Registration No. 4432595 Registered Office - Emery House, 192 Heaton Moor Road, Stockport, Cheshire, SK4 4DU.

Without the detailed consideration of administration systems, the purchase of an administration tool is always going to lead to an "empty feeling". The FIA are going to publish a document on effective administration in early 2008.

Further information is available via the FIA web-site at www.fia-online.co.uk or directly via the TIA-B section at www.fia-online.co.uk/TIA-B. Enquiries can be e-mailed to jane@fiasec.demon.co.uk or, alternatively, you can contact the FIA Secretariat in 01763 273039.

Biography

As the Technical and Standards Director of the UK Fibreoptic Industry Association, Mike is heavily involved in the development of training and competence standards for the fibre installation industry and sets down policy in this area. In addition he chairs the audit and arbitration committees for the FIA. His book "Fibre optic cabling; theory design and installation practice" published in 1991 remains a reference for both experts and entrants into this field.

In the UK, Mike is Chairman of TCT/7, the BSI technical committee responsible for the three panels on telecommunication cabling. He also chairs two of these panels (TCT7/-/1 and TCT7/-/3). TCT7/-/1 acts to assist development of European and international standards for telecommunications cabling. TCT7/-/3 manages the implementation of European standards and others in the UK.

At the European level Mike is Convenor of CENELEC TC215 Working Group 1, the group that controls the development of European standards for the design and installation of telecommunications cabling.

At international level, Mike is Convenor of the Cabling Implementation Task Group (CITG) within ISO/IEC JTC1 SC25 WG3. This group is responsible for the strategic management of the international standards covering the specification, QA, installation, administration, operation, maintenance and repair of generic cabling. This work supports all the cabling design standards produced by ISO/IEC JTC1 SC25 WG3 including ISO/IEC 11801 and ISO/IEC 24702 for industrial premises produced by ISO/IEC JTC1 SC25 WG3 IPTG (also convened by Mike Gilmore).



Mike is a regular speaker at seminars and conferences in all five continents. He has provided the keynote address and opening presentation in many conferences in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. His seminars, providing regular updates on the progression of cabling standards are particularly well attended and are operating in the UK and continental Europe.

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