



The Fibreoptic Industry Association

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CABLE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS — A BIG “CON” OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD?

by

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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.

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.