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SECMP0024 'Enduring Approach to Communications Hub Firmware Management'

Working Group Meeting

25 February 2019, 13:00 – 16:00, Gemserv, 8 Fenchurch Place, London, EC3M 4AJ

Meeting summary

Discussion on the proposed solution

The Data Communications Company (DCC) presented their proposed solution to deliver SECMP0024 following completion of their Communications Hub Firmware Management Consultation. It was confirmed the proposed solution would allow Suppliers to carry out firmware upgrades at different times via scheduling, rather than all together, and the entire process could be voluntary until there was a need for a compulsory firmware upgrade. The DCC noted there may also be a point in the future when all Communications Hub firmware upgrades return to being managed solely by the DCC, however as stated within the DCC Firmware Management Consultation this will only be after an appropriate consultation with all SEC Parties.

The DCC approach would be loosely modelled on that used for the Hypercare project and would use a web-portal type interface for Suppliers. This portal would not require Service Requests, which is a considerable difference to the original solution proposed under SECMP0024. Additional tooling will be required to replace the spreadsheets used currently with Hypercare and to move to an interface similar to that of the Self-Service Interface (SSI). Notifications and alerts would then be managed via the web-portal.

It was confirmed there would be a pilot phase to ensure Suppliers were in control of deciding which of their customers would be upgraded and when, protecting those at risk such as vulnerable customers to ensure they were not part of any early deployments. There would also be split-Supplier approvals whereby Suppliers could use the interface to see where one Supplier has approved an upgrade to the Communications Hub and react as appropriate, without disclosing details of the Suppliers to each other.

How will firmware be tested?

One Working Group member queried the testing approach that would be taken for Communications Hub firmware updates prior to them being released. They wanted to understand the details of the testing that would be used and what User testing would be involved, as previous new Communications Hub firmware versions could not be deployed in Production although they had initially passed testing. It was queried whether there was a role for a group such as the Testing Advisory Group (TAG) in this. However, the Working Group concluded this was not a matter for SECMP0024 to resolve, as it was raised to resolve the issue of the firmware being deployed. The DCC also noted workshops were being set up to gather more detail in this space.

How would the solution be governed?

Suppliers questioned whether they would be able to upgrade a Communications Hub if devices attached to that Communications Hub in the Home Area Network (HAN) could not be upgraded, e.g. In-Home-Displays (IHDs) and Prepayment Metering Interface Devices (PPMIDs) as per the outstanding modification SECMP0007 'Firmware updates to IHDs and PPMIDs'. It was raised that should the solution be optional rather than mandatory, then there could be a risk of Suppliers not carrying out upgrades to Communications Hubs if they thought the upgrade might negatively affect the HAN and cause disruption to other devices and the connection in general. Suppliers raised whether there was the potential for the solution to be implemented in alternative methods should there be little governance in place.

Suppliers raised concerns over the DCC having sole responsibility of upgrades in the future and a potential lack of governance should this not be passed through as a Modification Proposal. However, the DCC appreciates SEC Parties concerns and agrees with the implementation of upgrades through the Modifications Process so that the industry can be confident in the agreed solution. As a result, the DCC is bringing its proposals from the DCC Firmware Management consultation back to SECMP0024 to ensure appropriate governance and to allow SEC Parties to select the most appropriate solution.

The solution proposed by the DCC would need to be enduring, and it was questioned whether a Modification Proposal would be required to implement a web-portal. The Working Group agreed that it would be beneficial to have a process written down and governed via the SEC, to prevent changes from taking place in the future without adequate warning or consultation.

How will Supplier's systems be affected?

It was questioned how Suppliers would be able to manage and merge the web-portal with their internal systems and firmware portfolios, noting that the SSI and internal systems were not yet merged. The Working Group requested a side by side comparison of the two solutions to be presented, as well as cost expectations for both, in order to make an informed decision. This would also assist in understanding the impacts to Supplier systems, the scale of the change required and the timescales. The Working Group asked whether the implementation for the DCC's web-portal solution and the original Service Request-based solution would have the same impact on the Communication Service Providers (CSP). Members considered that the lead time to implement the web-portal could be much shorter than introducing new Service Requests. The lead times for each option would be drawn out in the Preliminary Assessment response.

Concerns were raised over how user friendly the web-portal would be, and that Suppliers were already well-versed in how to use Service Requests, noting that the consensus could be to use Service Requests based on experience.

The Working Group highlighted they needed to avoid any clashes or problems with firmware upgrades in Change of Supplier (CoS) situations, so there would need to be a marrying up of information between Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and the portal, potentially to have information updates in real-time.

Will the proposed solution be a uniform approach?

The DCC confirmed the proposed solution was modelled on Hypercare and agreed to issue the Hypercare solution document to Working Group members once the document has been formally approved by DCC operations. Suppliers noted they had experienced different levels of service from the CSPs when it should be a uniform approach, e.g. some CSPs ask for a list of locations to be upgraded with a planned approach while others upgrade without warning. The DCC recognises the experience SEC Parties refer to, as an interim manual Hypercare approach was used. However, the automated solution would introduce the uniform approach SEC Parties have requested.

With Hypercare, Suppliers also noted that they were not receiving alerts from the CSPs once an upgrade was carried out, meaning that they were unable to carry out further work. Suppliers agreed they needed assurance that all CSPs would follow the same process, should the proposed solution be implemented, to be achieved via Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Members noted that the solution developed would need to be consistent and reliable so that Suppliers can build their processes with confidence.

Do the costs of any proposed solution outweigh the option of maintaining the interim approach?

One member also queried whether this solution was just a variant of what is done now, but with a huge cost attached to it. However, it was noted the costs of doing nothing and maintaining the Hypercare approach would need to account for the spreadsheets used in this being scaled to millions of Communications Hubs, which could quickly become unfeasible. Ultimately though, the solution comes down to the CSPs being presented with a list of Communications Hubs to upgrade and a time period for each upgrade.

Actions

The following actions were taken from the meeting:

- The DCC will share the Hypercare Solution Document with Working Group members.
- SECAS will clarify the business requirements and re-send these for a DCC Preliminary Assessment. These will cover the original solution option as well as the DCC solution, ensuring the following new requirements are captured for both:
    - Machine-to-machine interface allowing the combining of CRM systems to the DCC web-portal to allow potential real-time updates; and
    - Confirm the repercussions should a solution be considered optional or mandatory for the entire process.