

Is IP a 'black art' or the solution for today's fire and security installers?



James Winter, the UK representative to European standards body CENELEC and an ASCOM partner in the UK, evaluates the issues.

So far, the UK has been reluctant to embrace IP solutions and has had many negative experiences with costs and reliability. In the past, IP has not always performed as they say 'as it says on the tin' – or, to use the words of one company, 'IP has been up and down more often than a weather barometer'. But does this technology really deserve its reputation for being an unpredictable, confusingly IT-heavy 'black art' or has it now improved enough to warrant reconsideration? Indeed, could it actually be the perfect solution for today's fire and security installers?

To understand the answer to this question, we have to ask...

Q - Why has IP not been as enthusiastically embraced by installers in the UK as it has been in other markets?

A - During its development, the use of IP (which is not email or the World Wide Web) has unfortunately not always been a smooth experience. The early trials that innovators used proved to be immature systems that needed a little more work to perfect them. Furthermore, those with an interest in legacy systems drew attention to these initial difficulties in order to create a self-serving environment of doubt and distrust.

Q - So if these teething problems have been ironed out now, why do so many installers still lack the confidence to use IP?

A - At present, installers and maintainers perceive IP as something that the 'IT geeks' understand, but which won't suit hard-nosed installers with little time to fiddle about with concepts they don't quite grasp. They want 'plug and play' systems, which require minimal time spent on site configuring them.

In fact, newer IP-based systems have a more mature solution that can be truly self-installed and configured on or off site. All that the latest generation of IP devices require are elements that installers already understand, such as power supply; a secure location and a clear idea of what is required of the system as established by the risk assessment.

Q - Why should they look to change from what they know and love?

A - Telecommunication systems in the UK and beyond are changing. The move by BT to 21CN, the wider use of VoIP (telephone calls over a private network), and the use of a wider range of telephone service providers will create a different telecommunications environment than that which has been present for decades.

These changes mean that the cost of a dedicated PSTN for digital communication or Redcare may not be sustainable. BT Redcare at the very least requires access to a BT telephone line, and digital communicators may have other issues which could mean they become unsuitable or unreliable.

Within a few short years IP will be the norm, not the exception. NOW is the time for installers to get engaged with the technology and chose the system they are comfortable with, so they can learn how to develop the additional features and functions possible with IP before the changes in UK telecommunications really kick in.

Q - What should a security or fire signalling platform running on IP deliver to match the preferred aging alternatives such as digital communicators or Redcare - be it single or dual path?

A - It is key that installers remember that nothing has really changed: they still need to move information from the Control Panel (CIE) to an ARC with a secure Alarm Transmission System (ATS or SPT) in the shortest time and most reliable way possible. The equipment needs to be compliant and its power consumption needs to be calculated into the overall system's design load. If it is going to carry

fire signals it also should have 3rd party equipment approval from the LPCB or similar – or put more technically, it must be suitable for PD 6662 applications and/or BS 5839 for fire systems.

Q - What are the essential elements of an IP platform?

A - An IP platform must:

- Have a statement of conformity of compliance with EN 50131-1 to a specific grade.
- Ideally have 3rd party approval to EN 50136-1 and EN 50136-1-5 for IP products and meet the Environmental Standards.
- Be designed for use on 21CN and private networks.
- Deliver single or dual path operation as standard to comply with PD 6662.
- Be an acceptable system to use with the chosen ARC partner.
- Be quick and simple to connect to the CIE when on site.
- Take just minutes to be configured in the office, if it has GSM/GPRS path or you have an IP connection such as BT Broadband. If not, a common build must be agreed with ARC that can be remotely configured later to the site-specific requirements.

If you are attending the IFSEC 2008 you can see the ASCOM range of solutions in Hall 18, STAND 20205 (ipTNA and openTAS) or visit our website at www.ascom.com and look at our safety and security pages for the latest in IP plug and play solutions for fire and security applications.

