What Goes into an SD-WAN Implementation Plan?

bcm|one™

Human Focused. Technology Solutions.

What Goes into an SD-WAN Implementation Plan?

Upgrading your network to SD-WAN requires an SD-WAN implementation plan. Learn how to ensure your transition is smooth and successful.

It's All About Connectivity

The majority of businesses today, large and small, rely on reliable network connectivity to keep operations running. In fact, a 2018 TechTarget survey found 44% of respondents are prioritizing upgrading their networks within a year. This can be a challenge given how dispersed today's workforce is. Companies can have multiple national and global locations, as well as remote workers on the network. Add to that the vast number of cloud applications, streaming and video content, WiFi, video conferencing, social media, and more each employee may be using at any one time and you can easily strain bandwidth capacity.

For many companies, transitioning from traditional multiprotocol label switching networks to software-defined wide area network (SD-WAN) is the answer. Implementing such technology, however, isn't as easy as plug-and-play. The switch requires different technology and network expertise. Network leaders must have an SD-WAN implementation plan that paves the way to an easier, faster, less-risky, and cost-effective implementation.

Related: IT Leaders Reshaping Their IT Priorities in This New World

If you are looking to lower your company's network costs, boost overall bandwidth capacity and speed across locations, and gain greater flexibility and control over your network traffic, SD-WAN is the way to go. Just make sure your SD-WAN implementation plan follows the right steps.

Planning Ahead: What Goes into SD-WAN Implementation?

An SD-WAN implementation plan is necessary to ensure a smoother transition. By doing the upfront work and aligning resources ahead of time, you will save yourself costs, delays, and frustration.

Step 1: Assess Your Current State vs. Desired State

One of the first steps of any strategic plan is to understand what you already have in your network and compare it with where you want to go. Before you invest in new technology or take your company through significant change, you want to be certain you know what you actually need first. Talk with the rest of the business - the users - and ask them what problems they are having with which types of applications and networking needs.

When it comes to your communications network, where are you seeing issues? Are there bottlenecks, latency, poor quality or security issues? Is your network stable and reliable? The Interop ITX 2018 State of Infrastructure research report found that bandwidth issues continue to plague the enterprise, forcing companies to increase their bandwidth capabilities. Can you relate?

Now, consider the needs of the business as a whole, currently, the near-term, medium-term, and long-term. While technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, you want your investment to last as long as possible, scaling with your company as it grows and changes.

Step 2: Assess Your Risk and Your Risk Tolerance

Risk is everywhere. You may not be able to eliminate it completely, but you can be proactive in how you plan for potential risks. That's why it's important to include it in your SD-WAN implementation plan. In this exercise, you should perform both a qualitative risk analysis to gauge the probability and severity of potential risks of the SD-WAN technology and implementation into your company's network. Next, move to a quantitative risk analysis to better understand possible outcomes and focus on areas that need the greatest attention.

Keep in mind that risk can only be analyzed within the context of your company's risk tolerance. Being able to score risk makes this much easier, giving leaders a common language to understand risks relative to set thresholds.

Step 3: Define Your Objectives

Now that you know your desired end state, it's time to create your objectives. What exactly are the goals of your SD-WAN implementation project? These should be specific, outlining implementation goals and objectives that deliver the desired outcomes.

Step 4: Obtain and Allocate Resources

Here's a stat that should get your attention: Harvard Business Review found that 67% of even the best business strategies fail due to poor execution. The success of your SD-WAN implementation is predicated on having the capacity to actually perform the necessary work.

Staff, network and IT skills, and funding must be aligned with your project. Further, you need to know how assigning these resources to the work may impact other ongoing or scheduled projects. Will you need to pull resources from another project to execute the SD-WAN implementation? If so, how will that impact the other project? Should projects be re-prioritized?

Once you've prioritized your SD-WAN implementation, it's time to assign resources. This may be internal resources or outsourcing to a third-party vendor to provide the technology and/or the services. No matter who you choose to actually execute the work, everyone needs to know their role in the implementation. Sharing your SD-WAN implementation plan with stakeholders plays a critical role in getting everyone on the same page working towards the same goals.

Step 5: Build Your Roadmap

Successful implementation requires a detailed roadmap that outlines how you will get from where you are now to where you want to be. This should include your budget, roles and responsibilities, timelines, and key performance indicators (KPIs). The roadmap will guide the implementation, providing stakeholders with a path to be able to see not only where the project is at any given time, but where their contributions will play a role.

If you decide to have a third party vendor manage the implementation, work with them to develop this roadmap. You should be part of the planning process and understand exactly what they will provide and when, as well as if you or anyone else in your company will play a role. Consider your vendor as an extension of your department. Yes, they may provide the technology and/or services, but they ultimately answer to you and are there to ensure your strategic objectives are met.

Related: How to Choose Between DIY vs. Managed SD-WAN

Step 6: Evaluate Vendors

Even if you decide to deploy and/or manage the SD-WAN yourself, you will need to partner with a vendor to provide the actual technology and equipment. You may evaluate expertise and reputation, pricing, technology and equipment offerings, service and support offerings (and are those delivered in person or remotely), security features, and other factors. Forbes recommends working with your shortlist of potential vendors to prove their device stability and technology reliability. You will also need to have discussions about what internal modifications you may have to make in order for the technology to integrate with or replace existing network technology. They may be able to help you manage these modifications if needed so be sure to ask.

An important consideration that is frequently ignored is whether the vendor will build into their schedule the time it takes to really get to know your business and your network needs. Some vendors have cookie-cutter offerings that aren't customized to the specific needs of their clients. The best SD-WAN providers will

work with you through your SD-WAN implementation plan and help you design an ideal network for your environment. They'll then be there to deploy or help your team deploy and manage the network and its components.

A final note about evaluating SD-WAN vendors. You should have the *choice* to work with an SD-WAN provider directly or manage it yourself. Ask the vendors you are evaluating whether they can support your preference. Can they put all of the components together for you to manage internally or are they all or nothing?

Final Thoughts

Upgrading your network to SD-WAN is a smart move in today's highly connected world. Business operates at light speed and you can't afford bandwidth or quality issues. As more companies modernize their networks, legacy networks will likely limit an organization's ability to keep up. Customers and employees expect high-quality, interruption-free communications and connectivity to their apps. Be sure your network can support and sustain everything your people need to help drive the business forward.