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5G's Best Kept Secret: What Vendors Don't Want Operators To Know

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Despite the Covid-19 pandemic bringing most of the world's economy to its knees, the rollout of 5G has come through relatively unscathed. In fact, [a recent study](#) from my company found that 37% of mobile operators are looking to go live with 5G standalone (SA) in the next two years. If anything, connectivity is higher on the agenda than it was before the crisis.

A poll showed that 1 in 2 American and British businesses are getting their ducks in a row [for 5G](#). That's because most businesses, particularly in the current climate, know what a boon 5G will be as the world continues to transform. The main advantage, of course, is speed. But simply referring to 5G as a "faster version of 4G" is doing the technology a great disservice. Those operators and businesses already gearing up for 5G know the extent of the opportunities that could soon be available to them. Brand new use cases and the ability to monetize the enterprise sector across multiple vertical markets are just some of the delights operators are looking forward to.

The truth is, 5G represents a tectonic shift in data management for operators that many vendors are reluctant to talk about. It is the industry's dirty secret.

Goodbye, Vendor Lock-In

3GPP is the standards body that develops protocols for mobile telecommunications. [Release 16](#) from 3GPP will set the standards for 5G deployment. What makes this significant is that for the first time, operators can combine vendor equipment without being tethered to just one supplier.

Release 16 defines a clear line of separation in 5G's data and network functions. Network functions will be able to tap into one database that can contain structured and unstructured data. This is called a network data layer. This may not sound like much, but for decades, a group of large vendors have had somewhat of a stranglehold on operator networks and charged a small fortune for data management. Release 16 will bring that pseudo-monopoly to an end. It gives operators unparalleled freedom when it comes to selecting vendors. Whisper it: "No more vendor lock-ins!"

Whichever way you slice Release 16, it comes up smelling of roses for operators. For the first time, they'll have a cloud-native, open network data layer to break through data siloes. All the disparate data siloes will finally be accessible from a single, simplified repository. Thanks to this, any type of data can be stored and accessed — from the core to the edge — for any type of application.

Take Back Control

Some large vendors have tackled this issue head-on and have disclosed Release 16's implications. Yet, even the most verbose vendors have been suspiciously silent about the benefits of a vendor lock-in-free network data layer and the ability to mix and match equipment.

Vendor lock-ins have stifled innovation in the industry over the past few years, and this has hampered the operator's ability to fully leverage and even monetize 4G. Still, despite some major vendors constantly trying to block Release 16, and the small matter of a global pandemic delaying discussions further, the update is now imminent. Large vendors are going to have to earn their place on a more level playing field — and operators finally have control over their networks.

What we're seeing with the announcement of Release 16 is dramatic — and some would argue a much-needed overhaul. It'll benefit operators for sure, allowing them to commercialize 5G much quicker. This also makes it a huge win for end-users and business customers, who are likely to see improved services, better prices and faster evolution of capabilities.

What's Next For 5G?

So, how can mobile operators prepare for 5G and the implications of Release 16? 5G presents an opportunity to change into a new service-based approach for internal functions with well-defined standard interfaces. This presents numerous advantages to develop new use cases and grow your business.

In the initial stage, consider how the valuable assets of user, device and application data can be stored and distributed across network and cloud. This will provide a foundation for how services can be developed. In effect, educate yourself on the best approaches on the ownership and management of data — your assets — as it will be the cornerstone of value for the business. An open, innovative ecosystem where you are in control of the data will give you the choice of best-in-class functions for different use cases.

One critical tenant of success is how you leverage new communications software, specifically with continuous integration and continuous development (CI/CD). This is more than saving money. This is reinventing your way of working! This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to open up your network and unleash innovation, reducing the time to adopt and deploy new features and boost creativity.

Looking beyond the business of today and your current competitive landscape, there is now another threat operators need to be aware of: the Silicon Valley behemoths. These hyperscalers are slowly but surely vying to take control and monetize 5G data. They will move quickly, and you must embrace change. An open ecosystem that enables you to deploy multi-vendor solutions underlies the reinvention of your business models and provides the foundation for your success in 5G.

There will, of course, be room for improvement in the rollout of 5G in the coming years. Many are pushing 3GPP to go one step further and even introduce advanced standardization. While Release 16 may be one small step for telecommunications, it's one giant leap for 5G.



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