

September 2017



# Video Conferencing and AV Managed Services

An IT-Manager's Guide to Making Educated Decisions

This study sponsored by



# Understanding Managed Services

Managed services are not new. In fact, providers have been offering managed services – in one form or another in various industries – for more than 25 years. And for good reason. Managed services offer key benefits for customers and providers alike.

## Managed Services – The Cloud of Confusion

Despite their market tenure, managed services are commonly misunderstood by providers, prospects, and even customers.



The chart above highlights just some of the elements that industry participants often associate with video conferencing and AV managed service offerings. From on-site staffing to account reviews to end-user training, managed services have become a catch-all for almost any support item.

## Managed Services - Definition

Obvious question – why does it matter? So what if managed services means something different to each person and company, as long as the customer gets what he asks for.

The problem with a vague definition is that it makes it impossible to compare offerings and make educated, defensible choices.

So what exactly is a managed service? At Wainhouse Research (WR), we follow this definition:

***“A Managed Service is the outsourcing of the proactive, day-to-day operations management of a specific area or discipline.”***

Essentially, a managed service involves shifting the operational burden of a service away from the internal service owner (e.g. an enterprise IT manager responsible for his company’s video conferencing and/or AV environment), over to an external entity / team.

The focus of a managed service is the day-to-day operation of the service. So a video conferencing (VC) managed service ensures the reliability of a company’s video systems and meetings. Similarly, an AV managed service ensures the reliability of a company’s AV systems and meetings. Traditionally, these services focused on video and AV within meeting rooms only. Today, however, many providers have expanded their coverage to include users participating from their desks or mobile devices.

Note also that managed service providers should be empowered to act as appropriate to manage the service. So instead of waiting for the internal IT manager to discover that something isn't working, the managed service provider (MSP) should be able to proactively discover, troubleshoot, and resolve the problem independently – without the direct involvement of the internal service owner / customer).

### **Minimal Requirement and Related Additional Services**

The next most frequently asked question is, what are the minimal requirements for a managed service offering? More than ten years ago, WR defined the minimum requirements for a VC / AV managed service to be as follows:

- The ability to remotely monitor and manage related technology
- Access to a properly trained, capable, and video / AV-savvy help desk

Does this mean that a managed service provider should not offer additional support services? Quite the opposite – these additional related support options can be extremely valuable to the client.

Examples of some commonly offered related services include:

- Meeting scheduling services
- Audio conferencing / bridging services
- Video calling / bridging services
- Streaming / webcasting services
- Event management / support services
- Content creation
- Project management services
- Equipment sales
- Asset management
- AV system design
- System integration
- Control system programming
- Break / fix support
- Onsite staffing (e.g. meet-and-greet)
- End-user training

The above shows the breadth of expertise many managed service providers (MSPs) bring to the table. However, these additional support items are not required parts of a VC / AV managed service offering.

### **Remote vs. On-Site Support**

In the past, on-site support staff were the core of most VC / AV managed service offerings. The reason for this approach was quite simple; much of the technology could not be effectively managed remotely.

In some cases, the devices themselves lacked IP management capability. In other cases, the customer was unable or unwilling to give the service provider the required access to the enterprise network. To circumvent these issues, providers placed technical staff on the customers' premises.

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*Today, basically all visual collaboration tools offer remote management options.*

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Today, however, the situation is quite different in that basically all visual collaboration tools now offer remote management options. In addition, many AV devices now support remote monitoring and management – either directly or via an AV control system. Furthermore, enterprises have become accustomed to providing partners with network access to facilitate service delivery.

As a result, the video and AV managed service market has largely shifted away from on-site staff and toward remote support models.

## Dispelling Common Managed Service Myths

After many years of helping enterprise clients evaluate whether a VC / AV managed service makes sense for their company, we've come across a few common myths that should be addressed:

- 1) **Responsibility = Accountability** – managed service providers are well suited to shoulder the responsibility and burden of managing your VC / AV environment. However, they are not the service owners and thus cannot be accountable for the end-result. The buck still stops with you.
- 2) **You Can “Outsource-Away” Your Issues** – before a managed service provider can take responsibility for the success of your VC / AV environment, the environment must be stabilized. The issues that plague your service today will not just disappear when you hire an MSP.
- 3) **Managed Services Save Money** – while it seems reasonable that an MSP's incremental cost to manage your environment would be lower than your cost to do the same thing, the reality is quite different. Providers must hire, train, and manage qualified (expensive) people, invest in and develop advanced tools and systems, and generate profit for their investors. In the end, activating a managed service provider may increase cost. Fortunately, cost savings is not the main reason to activate a managed service provider (see below for more information).

## Why Should a Company Use a VC / AV Managed Service Provider?

Organizations should hire an MSP because they want to outsource a non-core function (e.g. video and AV management) to a team that focuses in that area, and simultaneously free their own resources to focus on more important things.



In other words, hiring a VC / AV MSP allows a pharmaceutical to focus on developing, producing, and marketing drugs – not on supporting AV meetings.

Similarly, hiring an MSP allows an investment bank to focus on raising capital, making acquisitions, and helping customers make money – not on launching video conference calls.

Organizations routinely outsource their food services, cleaning services, delivery services, and car services to other companies that focus in these areas. The same concept applies for video conferencing and AV service management.

To be clear – not every organization should outsource the management of their collaboration environment. In some situations, such as high security environments or companies with exceptionally custom needs, internal management makes more sense. We do, however, believe that most organizations should at least consider handing off the day-to-day work to companies for whom video and AV are a core competency.

# Types of VC / AV MSPs

WR has segmented VC / AV managed service providers into two categories: basic and advanced.

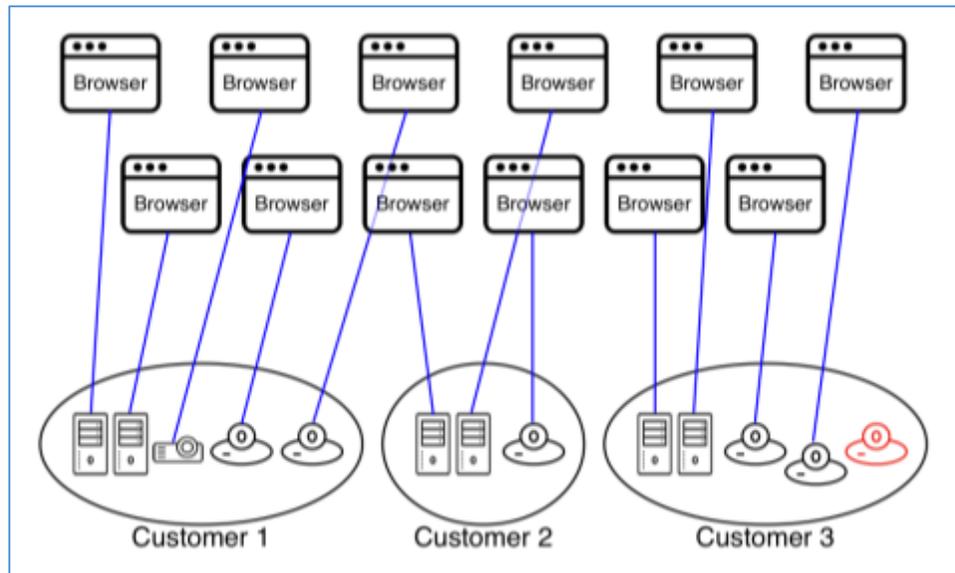
## Basic VC / AV Managed Service Providers

Providers within the “basic” category use individual browser instances to remotely access, monitor, and manage on-premises enterprise management systems and video / AV devices (see image below).

This approach depends on third-party VC and/or AV management tools designed to support a single company’s environment.

- In the video conferencing world, commonly used on-premises management software includes the *Cisco Telepresence Management System (TMS)* and *Polycom RealPresence Manager (RM)*.
- In the AV world, commonly used on-premises management software includes the *AMX Resource Management Suite (RMS)*, *Crestron Fusion*, and *Extron GlobalViewer*.

**Basic VC / AV Managed Service Provider – Typical Architecture**



Essentially, the MSP’s staff steps into the shoes of the customer’s local support team, uses the same basic tools, and often follows the same basic processes and procedures (with some marginal improvements).

For the actual video and AV users, the “changing of the guard” from internal to external resources often goes unnoticed.

The main accomplishment here is the shifting of the day-to-day workload away from internal staff. However, the customer enjoys little or no efficiency or scalability benefit with this approach.

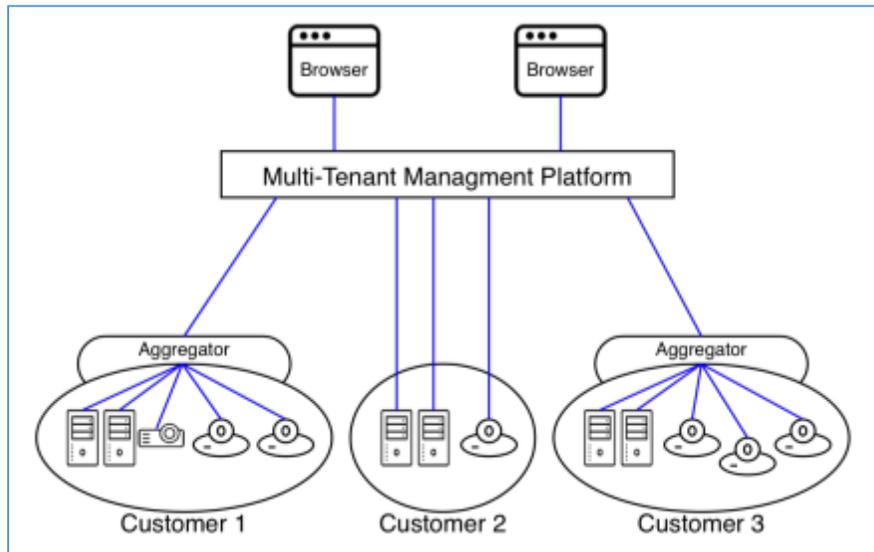
The vast majority of VC / AV managed service providers fall into the basic provider category.

## Advanced VC / AV Managed Service Providers

Providers within the advanced category leverage additional, often internally developed or custom, software tools and systems that allow them to manage multiple customer environments within a single unified dashboard / pane of glass.

As shown below, all systems and devices under management “connect,” either directly or through third-party management systems, to the provider’s centralized, multi-tenant management platform.

### Advanced VC / AV Managed Service Provider – Typical Architecture



With this approach, each browser instance provides the MSP’s support person with easy access to all of the systems and devices under management across all customers.

This single-pane-of-glass approach enables the provider to manage large numbers of devices and systems, and gain visibility into key performance indicators and metrics, without having to pivot between multiple instances of multiple applications on multiple customer networks. This expedites problem discovery and resolution, while simultaneously reducing cost and empowering scalability.

The table below highlights the fundamental differences between the two approaches. And basically all advanced VC / AV MSPs can offer a basic managed service, but the reverse is not the case.

Basic VC / AV Managed Service	Advanced VC / AV Managed Service
Uses enterprise (single customer) tools Needs a functional customer environment	Uses centralized, unified management platform Less dependency on customer’s infrastructure
Each customer managed separately Limited or no centralization / aggregation	Aggregates customer information into a single multi-tenant environment (one pane of glass)
A “brute-force” approach of layering outsourced staff on top of your existing environment.	An “efficient” approach using specialized tools and methodologies to streamline and optimize the management of the environment.

# State of the Market

## **The Video Conferencing Managed Services Market**

The video conferencing managed services market is relatively mature, with literally hundreds of providers offering some type of service.

The vast majority of providers in this space are video conferencing equipment resellers offering basic video managed services only. These companies are typically Cisco and Polycom certified, and thus have the knowledge and experience needed to operate Cisco and Polycom management systems.

Only a handful of firms, including [AVI-SPL](#), the sponsor of this study, offer advanced managed services.

## **The AV Managed Services Market**

Thousands of AV resellers and integrators promote their ability to manage customer AV environments. But marketing hype aside, only a small number of companies have productized these capabilities into an AV managed service with a documented set of services for a defined price. And only small percentage of these offerings would meet our definition of a true AV managed service.

The reason the AV managed service market has lagged behind the video market is simple --- variety.

- In the video world, providers need only support a handful of video system models to cover the majority of the market. And video managed service providers typically limit their scope of responsibility to the video technology and systems.
- In the AV world, there are thousands of devices to monitor and manage. And system designs (equipment used, signal flows, programming / configuration, etc.) vary by customer and even room. This variation makes cost-effective monitoring and management incredibly challenging.

However, the AV managed services market is poised for strong growth thanks to strong customer demand for turnkey AV environments, and increased use of standard AV designs by more organizations.

# Choosing the Right Provider

The list below includes some of the top themes and areas of consideration for enterprises seeking to optimize their VC / AV / UC estate and potentially choose a managed service provider partner.

- 1) **Clean Your Shop First** – in our experience, many end-user customers believe that hiring an MSP is a quick way to solve their longstanding VC / AV / UC issues. While true that MSPs are likely to bring skill and experience in this area, simply activating an MSP will not make the problems disappear. Instead, WR recommends that enterprises stabilize their environments to the extent possible before searching for and activating an MSP.
- 2) **Separate Needs vs. Wants** – the first step is to document your organization’s needs, as well as wants, as they relate to VC, AV, and UC. WR has found that many end-user customers mix their needs and wants, and as a result find themselves challenges to find providers able to meet their expectations. To resolve this issue, we recommend focusing on needs first, and wants later.
- 3) **Understand What You’re Buying** – to gauge the value and extensibility of the support you’ll receive, to ask the provider for information about the tools and systems used to power the managed service offering. This will help you determine whether the provider is a “basic” or “advanced” provider, and the specific features / functions being offered.
- 4) **Focus on Efficiency and Automation** – in recent quarters, scale has become a key theme in the VC and AV worlds. More users doing more meetings of more types in more places than ever before. To that end, WR recommends that end-user customers look for MSPs that bring more to the table than simply experienced staff. MSPs focused on efficiency and automation (e.g. automatic call launching, scheduled / automated system testing, etc.) are best positioned to deal with the large scale requirements of today’s next-gen work environment.
- 5) **Expect Total Transparency** – WR recommends that end-user customers require 100% transparency from their managed service providers. Enterprise managers should have the same basic view of their environment as the managed service provider. For example, the customer should have easy, real-time access to information about the health of their AV / VC estate, the currently open tickets, average ticket closure times, adherence to SLAs, etc. Simply receiving a manually created summary report at the end of the month does not provide full transparency.
- 6) **Minimize Customization** – many enterprises expect support partners to completely change their offerings to address their specific needs. And unfortunately, many providers do just that in order to win the business. Unfortunately, creating a new offering that caters to just one customer serves neither the provider nor the end-user customer. Instead, enterprises should seek providers with standard offerings that address their basic needs, and compromise where possible to avoid the need to customize the service.
- 7) **Make Apples to Apples Comparisons** – when comparing potential managed service partners, make sure the comparison is fair by first comparing the core MSP support services, and then optional value adds as appropriate. And most of all, don’t let anyone (advisors, consultants, resellers, etc.) complicate the discussion. Keep things tight and focused on the tasks at hand.
- 8) **Think Locally, Regionally, and Globally** – in the VC / AV integration world, there are often benefits associated with choosing a local provider(s). But in the managed services world, centralization is the key. Therefore, when choosing a VC / AV MSP, end-users should consider local and regional requirements, but make decisions globally.

# Solution Spotlight – AVI-SPL Services

The sponsor of this study, [AVI-SPL](#), is the world's largest AV integrator. The company employs more than 1,800 employees throughout its offices in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, and to date has completed more than 35,000 integration projects in more than 100 countries.

In addition to AV design, integration and cloud collaboration, AVI-SPL also offers an advanced video conferencing and AV managed service in use by some of the largest companies in the world.

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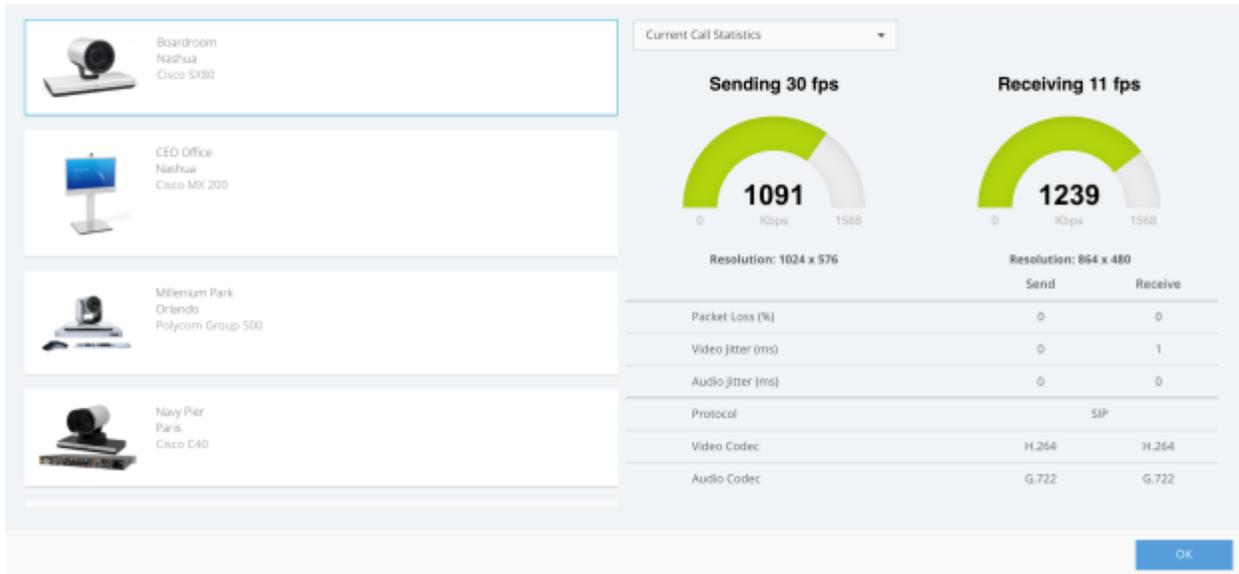
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The core of AVI-SPL's managed service is Unify ME Symphony; a multi-tenant video conferencing and AV management engine that AVI-SPL acquired in 2012 from Iformata Communications. Since that time, AVI-SPL has significantly enhanced the Symphony platform to include additional monitoring, management, and automation capabilities.

Key features of AVI-SPL's managed service include:

- Centralized and proactive device monitoring and management of AV devices (e.g. projectors, switchers, control systems, etc.), video conferencing systems, and conferencing infrastructure (MCUs, etc.)
- Support for multi-vendor environments (e.g. Cisco, Polycom, etc.) - with full feature parity (call scheduling, launching, monitoring, management, reporting, etc.) across all platforms
- Ability to connect to and leverage existing customer systems (e.g. Cisco TMS, Polycom RM, Crestron Fusion, Salesforce.com, Microsoft Exchange, enterprise ticketing / trouble tracking systems, etc.); simplifies and streamlines deployment and management
- Easy to use, browser-based and mobile-friendly, management portal with meeting scheduling, monitoring, usage reporting, status dashboards, and quality of experience (QoE) ratings for real-time access to system health and service levels
- Live monitoring of both scheduled and ad-hoc, point-to-point and multi-point, calls for performance and quality of the experience (QoE)
- Automated issue discovery and resolution engine that detects problems (e.g. packet loss or latency during a call, problems found during automated room sweeps, etc.), identifies the cause, creates a ticket, alerts the user, analyzes network performance, and more
- Configurable Business Process Automation Module (BPAM) that supports custom workflows and class of service rule sets on a per-customer, per-location, per-room, per-meeting, per-device and even per-user basis



The key takeaway is that AVI-SPL's intelligent management platform, Unify ME Symphony, allows it to offer an automated, scalable, 100% transparent, and highly customizable advanced VC and AV managed service, without having to customize its core offering in any way.

## Conclusion

A managed service involves outsourcing of the day-to-day responsibility of operations management into the hands of a qualified external provider. Just as many enterprises have engaged managed service providers to assist with various aspects of their business (e.g. IT support, network services, etc.), the outsourcing of VC and AV management is also worthy of consideration.

The vast majority of VC MSPs on the market today offer a basic service that leverages mostly enterprise management tools already deployed on the customer's premises. These "*basic MSPs*" manage each customer separately and use their help-desk personnel to replace the customer's internal staff. This approach is sometimes referred to as strategic staffing.

A limited number of VC MSPs have invested in additional tools and systems that allow them to manage multiple customer environments using a single unified platform. These "*advanced MSPs*" offer a more automated, scalable, and in many cases customizable approach than their basic MSP brethren.

And although the topic of AV managed services is frequently covered on integrator's websites, the reality is that only a small number of resellers actually offer a real AV managed service.

The sponsor of this study, [AVI-SPL](#), is one of a very limited number of providers offering an advanced managed service for both video conferencing and AV deployments.

End-user customers seeking to optimize their VC and AV environments should take the time to properly compare and contrast the various offerings on the market from the perspective of functionality, scalability, flexibility, and of course cost.

# About the Authors



**Ira M. Weinstein** is a Senior Analyst & Partner at Wainhouse Research and a 25-year veteran of the conferencing, collaboration and audio-visual industries. Ira has authored and contributed to dozens of articles, white papers, studies, reports, and evaluations on rich media communications, video conferencing, streaming and webcasting, audio-visual design and integration, business strategy, and general business practices. Ira specializes in providing strategic advisory services to vendors, resellers, and end-users within the collaboration space. Ira can be reached at [iweinstein@wainhouse.com](mailto:iweinstein@wainhouse.com).



**Saar Litman** is a Senior Researcher & Consultant at Wainhouse Research and has 17 years' of experience in the audio-visual and video conferencing industry. Saar's primary focus is the products, services, and companies within the audio-visual space. In addition, Saar provides AV design services, helps enterprise organizations define and implement global AV standard systems and designs, and manages the WR test lab in Coral Springs, Florida. Saar can be reached at [slitman@wainhouse.com](mailto:slitman@wainhouse.com).

# About Wainhouse Research



**Wainhouse Research**, [www.wainhouse.com](http://www.wainhouse.com), is an independent analyst firm that focuses on critical issues in the UC, conferencing, collaboration and professional AV markets. The company conducts multi-client and custom research studies, evaluates product and service offerings, consults with end users on key implementation issues, advises vendors on go-to-market strategies, publishes white papers and market statistics, and delivers public and private seminars and webinars.

# About AVI-SPL (copy provided by AVI-SPL)



**AVI-SPL**, [www.avispl.com](http://www.avispl.com), is a leading global services provider of AV, UC, and enterprise video solutions with award winning managed services. They deliver engaging, digital experiences that enhance the lives and work of our employees and clients around the world. AVI-SPL designs, deploys, manages, and supports technology strategy for our clients with offices throughout the U.S., Canada, and EMEA and with business partners in Asia and Australia.