

## Why small service provider organizations are better

Contributed by Stuart Smith  
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Do you ever wonder if there is a benefit to working with large, consolidated organizations?

In working with a variety of institutions, from science to business to church, I'm struck by how they are all similar in function. The trend now across the commercial landscape is consolidation. In our water-environment field, there are bigger fish swallowing smaller ones and international firms acquiring local firms. Small independents are now something of an exception. The attraction is to build economies of scale in market penetration and being able to bring multiple disciplines to bear on a problem.

However, there are down sides. I'm not a systems analyst, but there seems to me to be a friction effect that exerts a flywheel effect on overall effectiveness. Let's take for example telephone systems. The New AT&T has swallowed our local/LATA telephone service provider. Sometime before that, we switched our company system to a reseller who provides electronic voicemail, which SBC did not in Upper Sandusky, Ohio. Mind you, this is not a metropolis, but it is a small city of 7000 where there has been telephone service for a century. In our prior location in Ada, Ohio, Sprint offered electronic voicemail since the early 1990s.

AT&T naturally has relentlessly sic'd its marketing subcontractors on us to "win us back." In my attempt to research some information, I have been all over the AT&T customer "help" system, with each one person seemingly in charge of one piece of information. They cannot help you with anything else. One strange bit is that I have been informed that we cannot get voicemail here, the IT people in Texas and the Customer Winback people somewhere in the USA (no class in Bangalore is going to teach that accent) inform me. Now, through our reseller, we have voicemail. In the same building another line we also control has voicemail. If we could ever find anyone familiar with the local switch, we could probably sort it out, but AT&T makes sure you cannot contact a locally based human. Thus, to me, this reassembled telecommunications behemoth is inefficient and ineffective.

We experience something of the same in vehicle service. It's not the same at my 4WD's dealership. Since the previous owner - who sings in the church choir with me - retired and sold out, I can't stroll up the hall to talk to the owner about service. My vehicle record and service system is now part of an efficient, multi-dealership system, and these guys now need to follow the system. Will I buy there again? It's not a given, no matter the purchase price.

And how are you at finding anything in a Walmart? And good luck with that special order. Remember the hardware? They used to do those for you.

In our sectors, you get something of the same thing. No big consultant in their right minds (in their view) sends out senior staff on field work. Of course, we do. It keeps us in touch. With those other guys, they use driller data or send young staff. This can be good, or you can have inefficiency in 1) the transfer of information or its interpretation, 2) inexperience in "connecting the dots" (they have to consult the biologist in California about why there is pink slime in the water), etc. We find that many of the sub-Boomer young have narrow life experience and are specialized in education also.

So, if you can find some advisors who are integrative thinkers and problem solvers with some experience, you may be taking the most efficient path, even if you have to issue a new P.O.