

There's always more to learn

Training with the Billing College

Vodafone in Sweden booked a three day course of training in European Billing & Customer Care from The Billing College last month. Jeremy Cowan, VanillaPlus Editor in Chief, joined the second day of the course in Karlskrona, and had to sit at the front. That's what you get for being late for school.



Billing College founder, Avi Ofrane

The Course

The first thing that struck me about this Billing College course was the diversity of people attending. The 16 "students" were split 60:40 male and female, with the majority aged 25 to 35. But it soon became clear that the range of experience was considerable. A couple of senior figures were matched by at least two delegates who were fresh into Vodafone, in fact one doesn't even start her employment until later this month. 'Catch them early' might be one motto, but the mobile network operator also believes in catching them often for there were others present who were "veterans" of the IT and marketing departments (see below, 'The Client').

Nor did all those attending come from one department or discipline. Inter-departmental co-operation was one evident winner from the three day course, as IT rubbed shoulders with Marketing and Product Management. Co-operation went further than that, as staffers from Vodafone (formerly Europolitan) were also accompanied by five representatives from consultants and integrators, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young (CGE&Y), and one from CSC. In fact, the departmental head of CGE&Y attended throughout and told VanillaPlus that he found it extremely useful as a refresher course.

The training course was titled, European Mobile Billing & Customer Care. Lasting three days, it inevitably involved considerable detail but not so much that it couldn't be equally appreciated by

business analysts, systems analysts, IT, finance and marketing specialists. It covered everything from 2G "Vanilla" GSM through GPRS to 3G. Not just with statistics but with a description and discussion of mobile generations; mobile networks; radio spectrum, licences and auctions; comparisons of fixed and mobile; and finally the place and role of billing systems.

The Trainer

But no matter how well structured the course, it is of limited use if it's inadequately taught. Quality of instruction is why Billing College courses are well regarded, and why its courses are booked by so many while some rival trainers are now cancelling courses.

The company has well over 3,000 alumni on its books in 30 countries and regularly goes back to refresh and extend the training of its former students. In all, 91 per cent of companies using The Billing College have sent students to attend further courses since its formation in 1996. In any business that is an extraordinary achievement.

On this occasion, the course was led by The Billing College's president and founder, Mr Avi Ofrane. Avi began his career in 1977 as an analyst with IBM, designing and implementing manufacturing systems. He has been involved in all aspects of the industry, including strategic planning, RFP processing, vendor evaluation and selection, business process engineering, business/systems analysis, project

management, implementation, operations, quality assurance, and executive management. Since 1982, Avi has concentrated exclusively on the telecoms industry. He is also co-author of the book "Telecom Made Simple".

Perhaps most of us take for granted the depth of knowledge that a tutor shows. But for me the real skill here was in handling the unexpected and unscripted elements each day, as we saw later in a group role play. He fielded questions from all quarters showing equal ability to discuss IT and billing systems integration with rating, revenue assurance, finance, and network management as he did discussing the relative merits of different marketing and business plans.

The Lessons

The emphasis in the course was on creating an informal atmosphere (only one tie was seen) but structured with regular coffee and meal breaks, and set in a classroom style desk lay-out. There was a great deal of detail to absorb and anything less than this would have seen attention wandering, making learning harder and less enjoyable.

And it was enjoyable; the second morning began with a billing quiz (See "Le Quiz") which put everyone into the spotlight and did wonders for concentration levels – nobody wanted to be the first to get an answer wrong in front of their colleagues. 🙌



The Exercise

For example, in what would be described by many speakers and tutors as the graveyard slot (from 2.00-3.30pm), the class was broken up into pairs and each was given the following brief: "You work for the billing department of WowNet, a GSM operator. The company is planning new 3G services and you are on the product development team. You are looking at potential products and services and, as the billing representative on the team, you are to analyse the billing impact of the proposed services. One of these is NetRacing, where subscribers can watch and gamble on horse racing on their mobile devices. How will the gamblers be charged? What if they win? What partners will be involved in providing the service? Who has to be paid? Who has to be charged? How does WowNet make money on this service?"

Within minutes several different business models were proposed. This enabled the class to discuss not just the technical aspects of who would help provision the service but also the varying degrees of risk and return. Guided and moderated by Avi, it became clear that while some plans might work in the market conditions of the last few years where investment in new services was easy, in the current climate the group should look at alternative business models. These might bring WowNet less initial risk, while leaving the company free to increase their control of (and return from) the service later if it proved successful.

The Client

VanillaPlus asked Vodafone in Sweden what they want from training. Ewa Bergvall, Assistant to the IT Department, who booked the course said: "Change happens so fast in telecoms that we have to train continuously. This course isn't just IT training, it's for all people concerned with the company. We want to be the leader in the market, and for that you must know all the technology. You can't just be trained once in this business, you have to be trained all the time."

"Who we send depends on the skills that people have when they join Vodafone. Mandatory training is handled by the HR department, but individual training plans are drawn up by the department managers, HR and the employee. We used to send people to quite a few courses in London but they needed flights and hotels, so eventually – with our integration partners at CSC – we tried two courses here in Sweden with the Billing College. Since then we've been organising them here."

What about the alternatives to externally arranged training, such as E-Learning and in-house managed training? Yes, the company uses these approaches as well as traditional training, but as Ewa Bergvall pointed out, "we don't have time to put together all the internal training that we might like and it's not our core skill."

Some operators don't like to share training courses with their consultants, presumably expecting integrators to know it all already. What is Vodafone's view? "We've had a long association with CSC and CGE&Y, and perhaps they're more integrated with us than many of our competitors are with their consultants," said Ewa. "Besides, it's useful to have billing discussed generally, not just with reference to Vodafone. On this course it's not just technicians, people have come from all parts of the company. That way there's greater understanding within the company of what each department faces."

The Discussion Forum

The best evidence of that greater understanding came later in the day in the Open Forum Discussion. In other circumstances, "Discussion Forum" can sometimes be code for a shouting match. Not here. It was perhaps one of the most productive elements of the day.

Acting as moderator, Avi Ofrane asked representatives from two key departments to explain the processes they go through to develop new business plans. According to Mikael from marketing, there are two key processes: "The first is when the CEO phones up and asks directly what you are doing about a problem and everyone runs round like ants. The second is when customer analysis suggests that there is a problem and we work to develop, say, three plans. These are then tested on live customers, and the results show us which to proceed with."

Johan, also from marketing, added: "The problem for us is that, although it is very good to discuss with colleagues, sometimes they say we can't do that because of the system. We ask, are we customer driven or system driven?"

From the point of view of the IT department that has to make this work, Bob said: "We sometimes ask how much new business do they expect to get from this new plan? Do they know what it costs to implement?"

Mikael added: "If there's a problem sometimes I go to the CSC guys and get a view on the feasibility of the proposed solution before talking about it internally."

Avi interjected: "So there's an informal part of the discussion that's beneficial. Can that be formalised?"

"But if you formalise it then the route becomes rigid," said Johan.

"What happens in most carriers, is that IT isn't aware of the business need. Many carriers say there's no need for IT to know the business need," Avi replied amid laughter. "But the better that IT know the business need, the better they'll work with you," he said pointing to the marketing team.

The discussion continued for an hour and could have gone further, but throughout it there had been an obvious interest all round in enhancing co-ordination. One immediate outcome was an agreement that each new plan needed a single moderator to oversee discussions; someone who had skills in both areas and could find common ground between departments and ensure that enough time was given to assessing the feasibility of proposed solutions.

Here, in microcosm, was one benefit of the course. There was from the outset an understanding by the marketing department of why IT may not be able to look at the problem purely from the customer viewpoint. For their part, IT made it clear they wanted to be brought into the decision-making loop much earlier. You couldn't help wondering, would this method to improve their processes have been achieved so quickly if they'd all stayed behind in the office? Probably not.



'Le Quiz'

Not in French, nor were the questions all equally easy, despite the light-hearted tone and the chocolate prizes flying across the room for each correct answer. Imagine yourself in front of your colleagues and your boss; and try your hand at the following. You have 30 seconds to impress:

Describe the billing differences between fixed and mobile environments.

True or False; A cycle is a bike with one wheel? Discuss.

What is Churn?

What is a Primary Key?

What defines a CDR?

Give an example of a Loyalty Plan.

What are the elements of a Mobile Contract?

What information flows from the Customer Care Dept to Billing?

What information flows from the Network to Billing?

Describe the challenges in implementing 3G.

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