

TELECOMMUNICATIONS NUMBERING ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Availability of Subscribers Numbers to 3G Mobile Services (II)

Introduction

At the 41st meeting held on June 2001, NAC Paper No. 8/2001 presented the TA's proposal to either reserve all the numbers in the number levels "63", "64", "65", "67" and "68" to the future 3G operators (including the MVNOs) or raise the existing utilization rate of 2G mobile network operators from 60% to above 80% in order that they would better utilize the existing allocated number blocks before requesting the TA to allocate additional ones.

2. The representative of the Public Radiocommunication Service Licensees as a Group had requested OFTA to convene a meeting with the mobile operators to discuss the TA's proposal in details. A meeting was held with all the mobile operators in mid August. This paper discusses the findings of the meeting and presents the TA's views on these findings.

Utilization of mobile numbers

3. The mobile operators considered it difficult to achieve a utilization rate of 80% as proposed in NAC Paper No. 8/2001 because sufficient numbers as buffer should be allowed to cater for their operational requirements, including the following major aspects:

- a) Numbers were assigned to prepaid SIM cards when the cards were produced, even though the cards had not been distributed to the sales channels or had not been activated by end customers. However, under the methodology adopted by OFTA in calculating utilization rate, only those activated numbers are considered as utilization. Under this circumstance, the operators had to maintain a buffer of suitable size to allow for the numbers consumed, but not yet activated, for their prepaid cards operation.
- b) The operators estimated that there were about 20% "unwelcome" numbers in each number block.

- c) A certain amount of numbers was needed for system use which could not be assigned to end customers.

4. At the meeting, the operators were requested to submit operational statistics to justify their claims. The statistics should show the amount of numbers allocated for prepaid card, the amount of activated cards and the amount of numbers for expired cards. Further views from the operators on the issue of “unwelcome” numbers and numbers for system use were also welcome.

5. Having received the submissions from the operators, the following points were noted

- (a) The amount of numbers allocated for prepaid card, which include those cards under production, in stock, distributed to sales outlets, etc, (the prepaid card number buffer), but exclude those activated cards, accounts for 4 - 16% of the total allocated numbers for different operators.

TA’s preliminary views:

The TA notes the wide variation in the percentage of numbers allocated for the prepaid card number buffer. The minimum buffer size is just 4% of the total allocated number while the maximum size is 16%. For illustrative purpose, an operator using 10% of the total allocated numbers (say, 2 million numbers) as prepaid card number buffer is equivalent to the consumption of 200,000 numbers. Having considered the total numbers¹ of activated cards and the sizes of the prepaid card number buffers of each operator, the TA considers that the sizes of the buffers of some operators are too large and there are considerable rooms of improvement.

- (b) The percentage of “unwelcome” numbers varies among operators. An operator further submitted that 50% of numbers in a number block are unwelcome numbers. It generally refers those numbers containing the digit “4” as “unwelcome” numbers.

TA’s preliminary views:

The TA’s position on this issue had been given in NAC Paper No. 3/2000. It stated that all numbers and codes in the numbering plan are scarce resources.

¹ Actual numbers of prepaid card issued are commercially sensitive information and would not be disclosed.

Operators should well utilize and manage them as well as efficiently deploy and assign them in the networks and to customers. In making a decision to subscribe to a mobile service, a customer would not just consider the mobile number offered by mobile network operator, but also consider the network performance, price, service package offered, after-sale and customer care service etc. of that mobile network operator. In order to promote the efficient use of the valuable numbering resources, mobile network operators are obliged to encourage customers to use those less attractive numbers. The operators should endeavour to promote efficient use of numbers in accordance with the principles laid down in the Code of Practice relating to the use of numbers and codes in the numbering plan.

- (c) Three operators reported that the amount of number for system use were 0.5 – 2.5% of their total allocated numbers.

TA's preliminary views:

The TA's view on this issue had also been given in NAC Paper No. 3/2000. The TA believes that the numbers used for these purposes should, as compared to that assigned to customers, be of very small amount. Although the reported figure of 0.5% for system use is still considered to be on the high side, it was basically in line with the TA's estimation. The TA considers that amount of number deployed for system use should not be significant compared with the total allocated number and welcomes further inputs from the other operators.

7. At the meeting, the operators proposed that additional number resources should be identified, rather than restraining the mobile operators to the currently available resources, for the mobile services. It was suggested that numbers in the 8(4-9) number level should be considered for mobile services. As explained at the 41st meeting, any proposed allocation of numbers at number levels other than "6" and "9" to mobile services involved fundamental changes to the numbering policy should be thoroughly deliberated and consulted before a view could be taken by the TA.

8. Having considered the additional information submitted by the operators, the TA is of the view that the utilization of mobile numbers could be further improved by reducing the size of the prepaid card number buffer and promoting the assignment of less attractive numbers to the customers. In addition, the TA is of the view that the mobile operators should have no operational difficulties when the utilization rate of their allocated numbers exceed 60%.

9. Before a decision on whether and when the utilization rate should be increased to 80%, OFTA would continue to process application from operators who has fulfilled the minimum criteria for submitting application for additional number blocks (currently set at an utilization rate of 60%). But the operators will have to provide details about their utilization of the numbers not yet assigned to active customers, including the actual amount and ranges of numbers in each allocated number block/sub-block deployed for various purposes. The utilization will form the basis for TA's consideration for allocation of numbers in the next application.

Advice Sought

10. Members are invited to give their views and comments on this paper.

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