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taking so long?

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Why is your number port taking so long?

On first thought, moving your phone numbers from provider to provider seems like a simple idea. But in reality, it's a process with a lot of complication behind the scenes. In order for your number to port in a timely manner, the entire process has to go right.

It starts way back in history.

To understand how porting works, and what the process entails, you first need to understand the system porting was invented to work with – the POTS network of yore.

Phone numbers are maps.

The phone number system was set up to be meaningful in terms of provider. First operators, then automated switches, knew where to send calls based on number codes. The area code would get the call to the correct regional switching station. The next three numbers, the “exchange”, took the call down to the physical switch level. And the four numbers at the end, the numbers assigned to your carrier, got the call to your line at your physical home or business address as directed by the exchange. It's a system invented before people had the wizard-like ability to take phones anywhere. A time when knowing where to send calls was easy because most calls were staying on the same massive monopolistic network.

Number portability breeds competition.

The FCC was right to set phone numbers free upon the breakup of AT&T. Keeping your number was a powerful motivation for loyalty. It would be near impossible for new phone companies to grow if they could only sell service to people getting a phone for the first time, or those willing to go through the headache of changing the phone number they've had for 2.5 decades.

As it solved one problem, the idea of number portability raised another. How could numbers be found if they were no longer organized based on catalogued number assignments? Unless the catalogue was somehow updated in real time, calls would show up at the originally assigned provider's switch and be told, “that number don't work here no more” before being dropped like a moldy hot potato.



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How numbers move.

The Number Portability Administration Center (NPAC) has the answer. Local Number Portability (LNP) was made possible by the creation of an additional numbering system, Location Routing Numbers (LRN), a unique 10-digit telephone number assigned to a switch (there can be multiple LRNs on the same switch). As NPAC describes the invention of the LRN system, “It allowed the existing routing paradigm to remain in place, permitting a gradual conversion of the network to handle LNP traffic.” So now the switch that serviced a number originally can be much more helpful and point a call toward the new host switch.

So that’s how and why number portability works.

But what’s the process?

NPAC lays it out succinctly:

1. The new service provider notifies the old service provider of the requested port.
2. The old service provider is asked to validate the subscriber’s information.
3. The old service provider confirms the subscriber’s information and notifies the new service provider. (Note: this is where the process gets caught in a loop if the subscriber information submitted isn’t right.)
4. The new service provider notifies the NPAC of the requested port.
5. The NPAC creates a pending port and sends a notification to the old service provider.
6. Optionally, the old service provider notifies the NPAC that it concurs with the port.
7. The new service provider notifies the NPAC to activate the port.
8. The pending port is activated in the NPAC and broadcast to the telecommunications industry network within milliseconds.

Eight steps. Looks straightforward, but each step is a potential challenge and a problem. So where ports typically held up?

Even though much of the process is automated, there are people, and entire organizations, involved along the way. And those people and organizations can cause bottlenecks.



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Here's the hold up:

According to NPAC, “if there are no errors or issues with validations, and it is a simple port, the FCC has mandated that the request be completed within one business day.” That deadline applies to all simple ports, including “intermodal” ports such as wireline to wireless, wireless to wireline, wireline or wireless to VoIP or any other combination.

But the important distinction is the word “simple.” The FCC says, “Simple ports generally do not involve more than one line or more complex adjustments to telephone switching equipment.” So if you're porting more than one number or one number from a pool of others, it's not a simple port. And how do you define “more complex adjustments”? This definition makes it easy for losing carriers to define what's simple and what isn't. And it turns out, most ports aren't simple.

A lack of “simplicity” is the number one factor holding up number ports. Many carriers establish arbitrary “rules” around their porting process. Typically these rules revolve around release date. When your new service provider submits the request to port to your losing service provider they're at the mercy of the LSP's response policy. Some carriers we've had the pleasure of working with 'require' 30 days to process port requests.

And then while we're waiting patiently for that response, the information attached to the porting number, your Customer Service Record (CSR), is being scrutinized to make sure you have the authority to port your number, and avoid erroneous porting – for which carriers can be subject to heavy FCC fines. If there's a mismatch in your CSR data it's usually, and so conveniently, reported by the losing carrier right before the day the port is expected.

Get your data right.

There are a number of reasons CSR data doesn't match carrier records. Sometimes it's a typo. Other times it's because the person porting the number actually got it from a reseller, so the owner, as far as the carrier is concerned, is the reseller and the customer has no right to move the number. It could also be that the customer moved and didn't update their address. Simple things, really. But in this case they cause major delays. Because then you have to resubmit the paperwork with amended CSR data and get another release date another 30 (or so) days out. Then, on occasion, the losing carrier finds another problem with the CSR data (yep, they like to find errors one at a time), and the wheel keeps on rolling like that for another few cycles.

It makes sense that carriers want to hold on to numbers. The company that controls the number is the company that gets paid for service. But these days, it's up to the customer who they pay for phone service. Which is why the FCC mandates cooperation from all parties. And to be fair, some ports do require work on the part of the losing carrier.

To help your ports go as quickly as possible, double and triple check your CSR info before you submit it to your new carrier. Accurate data is the grease that gets the wheels moving fastest so you can enjoy all the benefits your new provider has to offer ASAP.