ShoreTel

AMARILLO ISD DRIVES MORE TIME ON TASK, LOWERS COSTS WITH SHORETEL PHONE SYSTEMS

Since long before the No Child Left Behind program, Amarillo Independent School District has put students first. Federal education standards only reinforced the district's pursuit of better communication between teachers and parents in the large district, which encompasses about 70 square miles in the Texas Panhandle, and serves 30,000 students with 4,000 employees across 50 locations.

In 2004, the district began exploring options for upgrading its phone system, with phones for every teacher as the ultimate goal. AISD's existing, outdated key phone system led to staff and cost inefficiencies: IT staff had to physically make moves, adds and changes by traveling around the widely distributed district; less than 100 staff members had voice mail; and the phone company could not provide enough copper wiring to expand the existing system to every teacher. Consequently, providing a phone or voice mail to every teacher would have been prohibitively expensive.

EXPANDED FEATURES, SIMPLE MANAGEMENT WITH SHORETEL

AISD looked to digital voice communications to free it from its inflexible copper-wired system while expanding functionality. After evaluating several different providers, including 3Com, Avaya, Cisco and Nortel, AISD selected the ShoreTel digital voice communications system. The ShoreTel system offered a number of valuable features to drive better communication and staff efficiency – for less than the cost of the old, limited system.

Additionally, while day-to-day management with some of the other providers would demand significant staff resources, the ShoreTel system seemed exceptionally simple to manage.

"As a school district, we don't have a dedicated phone staff," explained Jeff Roller, Internet systems analyst for AISD. "The ShoreTel system was very intuitive, easy to set up and easy to manage. A person can use the Web interface to make moves, adds and changes right from their desk. It's amazing how easy it is compared to other systems."

With the ShoreTel system, the district could keep costs down by using its existing analog phones. Plus, it could purchase services on a per-line basis, as needed, rather than as a large capital acquisition. The digital voice communication system is a vendor-provided managed system, making it eligible for federal e-rate funding. As a result, e-rate funds covered three-fourths of the cost of the solution.

Austin-based Trillion, a ShoreTel channel partner, worked with AISD to roll out the system across the district. Trillion configured unique call flow routing using ShoreTel work group features to route calls in various departments. Additionally, the partner acquired a common phone prefix for all district numbers to simplify dialing for staff and outside callers.

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Executive Director of Technology

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"Trillion worked with our IT guys to provide turnkey implementation," Roller said. "They really stepped up to the plate and have been more than willing to help us in any way. We have the flexibility to manage as much as we want or we make a call to Trillion and can count on them to get it done immediately."

With contracts in place with its local phone company, AISD opted for a phased implementation. Currently, approximately 532 staff use the ShoreTel system, including all administrative personnel and teachers at the four high schools. All users now benefit from voice mail and a number of ShoreTel advanced features.

VOICE MAIL, QUICK CALL ROUTING RELIEVE OFFICE STAFF

With unified messaging, staff and teachers can access their voice mail messages from any phone or receive the messages in their email inboxes. Or, staff can tap into the Find Me feature in ShoreTel to roll their calls over to a cell phone, if desired. This gives them the flexibility to receive calls and retrieve messages at any time, from any location, and frees office staff from handwriting messages.

Outside callers can locate staff through the built-in directory, which routes the call and gives the caller the direct number for future reference. That same directory feature streamlines call transferring for staff, who in seconds type in a few characters to find the right extension and route the call. With 500 users making numerous calls every day, that feature allows staff to be more productive.

WORK GROUPS ENABLE CUSTOMIZED CALL MANAGEMENT

ShoreTel work groups allow each department to designate their own call flows. For example, if they want a live person to answer calls, they can choose to route calls sequentially from one person to another until the call is answered, or have the calls go to one extension. For busy times or off-hours, they can turn on auto-attendants to answer and direct callers to the appropriate extension. Staff easily program in holidays and hours to activate auto-attendants automatically at specific times, relieving departmental staff from having to turn on the auto-attendant when they leave.

In departments like Human Resources and Food Services, work-group management has transformed communications. In HR, an auto-attendant directs calls to the right individual based on the need, whether related to contracts, employment, benefits or substitute teachers – relieving the person who previously answered every incoming call. Food Services more effectively manages daily calls from cafeteria managers at each of the more than 50 school cafeterias.

"The enhanced features add to productivity and allow more time on task," Roller said. "People are dedicated to their own work instead of just answering the phone.

Beyond that, the district also takes advantage of ShoreTel converged conferencing to connect various district administrators and staff. They can join teleconferences, without having to take extra time out of their days to drive across the city.

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The district will gradually expand the system to all campuses and roll out voice mail and phones to all teachers. AISD remains confident that ShoreTel's flexibility will accommodate its growing needs.

"As dynamic and flexible as the system is, we can customize it for each individual situation," Jeff said. "That's the beauty of it. It's been able to meet every situation we've come up to."

RESULTS: RICHER FEATURES, BETTER COMMUNICATION FOR LOWER COST

AISD upgraded its phone system to a feature-rich digital communications system that allows office staff to focus more on their jobs, rather than on answering the phone. Work groups empower them to manage their changing call flow needs, while auto-attendant directs callers to the right person. The IT staff easily manages the system, saving countless hours of driving to schools to make moves, adds and changes.

The district saves more than $20,000 a year over its old system, and has a flexible, scalable platform for cost-effective expansion as it grows.

Most importantly, features like voice mail and unified messaging allow teachers and parents to communicate more easily.

"Federal standards require that we improve communication with parents about their students' performance," said Gary Allen, executive director of technology. "We view the ShoreTel system as one leg of that stool, giving us a way to be more effective in allowing teachers and parents to communicate and improve student performance."