SHORETEL STREAMLINES BUSINESS AT MJSK

Communications are everything to Miller Johnson Steichen Kinnard, Inc., a full-service boutique investment firm based in Minneapolis. MJSK maintained its profitability through the recent market downturn by focusing on relationships and facilitating contact and information flow to and from clients and among employees.

The high end of the investment market remains a very voice-intensive business, and MJSK was faced with a dilemma when planning a headquarters move in 2003. There could be no disruption in voice service, and replicating the existing Meridian PBX on a transitional staging network was going to cost $200,000.

"Though the staging equipment would be used very briefly, its resale value was only $10,000 to $15,000, so we decided to take a look at VoIP," recalls Matthew Hoban, MJSK vice president and director of information technology. Research confirmed IP telephony's potential as a very cost-effective platform, with benefits that extended far beyond the price tag: Converged communications set the stage for streamlined administration, increased productivity, and voice-enabled applications.

Hoban and his management came up with a list of basic requirements that prospective VoIP solutions would be judged against:

- Platform consistency and reliability
- Ease of use
- Ability to get people talking to people
- Cost effectiveness

Quickly ruling out Nortel's hybrid VoIP solution, MJSK evaluated systems from Avaya and Cisco before choosing ShoreTel.

The Avaya system didn't have a lot of software options at that point, but still cost about 15% more than ShoreTel. The Cisco system had too many options, raising concerns about complexity. It also would cost 30-40% more than ShoreTel to implement. And Hoban and his management were aware of the well-publicized problems other companies—especially Merrill Lynch—had had with Cisco as a voice platform.

"ShoreTel and its local reseller, Data Accessories, were very responsive and gave us fantastic support," says Hoban. "Our business is all about people and relationships. Money is secondary—although ShoreTel cost a lot less, too."

TRIAL BY FIRE

The headquarters move offered a unique and rigorous pilot-test opportunity, and MJSK purchased a ShoreTel system to use for the staging platform and new office. ShoreTel did so well in this trial by fire that the company decided to roll it out to the major branch offices. And it wasn't just the quality of the technology.

"The initial support we got from ShoreTel was a big selling point," Hoban says. "I appreciate the value of a good business relationship."

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MJSK's network infrastructure connects 200 employees spread across 10 offices in three states. Some of the executives and professional staff are on the road a lot, and teleworking continues to expand. Independent contractors and about 10% of MJSK's employees now work at home at least part of the time, and the company expects this trend to continue.

The corporate VPN has certificate-based security, and the continual, centralized distribution of up-to-the-minute market information keeps the data WAN connecting all the offices very busy.

The WAN connections for MJSK's three metropolitan offices have point-to-point T-1 links, and smaller branches have Frame Relay PVCs with rates of up to 750Kbps, depending on their size. Two 3-person offices in North Dakota each have 512Kbps PVCs that are terminated on the same host port in Minneapolis.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS ENABLE LEGACY INTEGRATION

While the data WAN was robust, the phone systems were fairly antiquated. Some branches were served by analog trunk groups, and one office still had Centrex.

After the successful migration of the metropolitan-area offices, the ShoreTel system was expanded to include most of the remaining locations. Toll bypass eliminated a lot of long-distance charges, and branch-office trunk requirements were reduced. Because ShoreTel deploys a single distributed system across multiple sites, trunking could be aggregated in Minneapolis to a certain extent to take advantage of better rates. When all branch office lines are busy, calls simply roll over to the main office.

The two smallest branches, housing two employees each, are still served by traditional telephony because they are in rural areas where a cost-effective WAN solution isn't currently available. Their numbers are included in the global ShoreTel directory, so employees elsewhere can reach them via point-and-click dialing from the Call Manager interface. Calls can also be transferred from the main switchboard to these two non-ShoreTel offices, using a PSTN connection.

Though ShoreTel supports analog phones, MJSK elected to deploy IP handsets to every desk in every office except the aforementioned 2-person branches. The sales assistants are being upgraded to ShoreTel's new IP 560 models, which have six-line visibility. The ShoreTel system was also integrated with MJSK's mission-critical IPC Turret trading system to facilitate intra-office communication. MJSK traders can use their Turret desktop devices to talk to one another extension to extension, instead of having to make an outside call to a colleague located in the same facility.

ONE SYSTEM FITS ALL USERS

ShoreTel's award-winning Personal Call Manager interface worked as advertised, requiring very little user training. MJSK's user population ranges from technology-resistant types who don't even have computers and do everything on paper to technophiles who eagerly acquire every new electronic gadget that comes along. For those who don't want to use the computer interface, the IP phones work just like the old Meridian handsets.

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![ShoreTel logo]

"ShoreTel was the only system with the tools to accommodate such a wide variety of users," states Hoban. However, most employees quickly saw the benefits of the easily customized Personal Call Manager interface with its Outlook integration and unified messaging.

MORE PRODUCTIVITY FOR EVERYONE

"As an IT person, it means I don't have to touch my phone," says Hoban. "I can put a headset on and keep both hands on my PC. That's actually a great productivity benefit for everyone in the firm."

ShoreTel makes moves, adds and changes a lot easier at MJSK, because they no longer require any wiring. Instead, the PC interface is used to drag and drop a user on a new location. By eliminating most of the physical work, Hoban and his staff have reduced the 20 minutes the process used to take down to three minutes or less.

In such a voice-intensive business, the receptionists have to deal with a huge volume of calls. Equipped with the operator version of ShoreTel's Personal Call Manager interface, the receptionists can view incoming calls without picking them up, and use the caller-ID information to drag and drop them on the most appropriate extension. ShoreTel's presence capabilities reveal which employees are currently at their desks, so calls are less likely to end up in voicemail. Important clients get priority treatment, and the caller-ID information gets passed on with the call transfer so the employee picking it up can greet them by name.

It takes fewer keystrokes to transfer calls and perform other functions, and there is 4-digit dialing and feature transparency across sites. The result is streamlined communications and recaptured time that can be put to productive use.

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GETTING PEOPLE TALKING TO PEOPLE

ShoreTel's user-configured call handling modes and follow-me, find-me features ensure that important callers get connected to the right people even if they are out of the office. Particular modes can be triggered by Outlook calendar entries.

"All our business is done on the phone," explains Hoban. For example, "clients aren't allowed to place trading orders to brokers via e-mail. ShoreTel propagates communication by getting people talking to people. That's the best thing I can say about it. The competition doesn't do this nearly as well."

ShoreTel has also been a big productivity booster for employees who travel around the country doing due diligence for MJSK's underwriting business. When their notebook is equipped with a softphone and headset, they can log in to the system from any broadband connection and have their office with them.

All the same features and functionality are available to these mobile employees, and calls made to their regular office numbers start ringing on the notebook. This cross-site routing is transparent to callers. Similarly, outgoing calls are routed through the ShoreTel IP-PBX, producing caller-ID readouts on the receiving end that make them appear to be coming from the MJSK office.

ShoreTel

With such a distributed workforce, MJSK makes heavy use of ShoreTel's built-in conference bridge. The full-service company's services include securities brokering, investment banking, asset management, institutional equity, research, and underwriting, and all of these departments are in constant communications. There are permanently scheduled sales and research meetings each day, along with a lot of ad hoc meetings. Some meetings are recorded and rebroadcast on the Internet.

Meetings and other business activities are enhanced by the document-sharing capabilities of ShoreTel's converged platform. For example, the previously paper-intensive account application process has been streamlined considerably, enabling new clients to start trading much sooner.

In short, ShoreTel's approach to VoIP and convergence makes it easier to get work done and respond to clients and situations, which is very good for business.

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