

WARN INDUSTRIES: VOIP CAPTURES THE MAINSTREAM



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The IP telephony question has moved from if to when to now. Warn Industries, a manufacturer of accessories and equipment for 4-wheel drive and all-terrain vehicles, represents a new generation of VOIP adopters who are demonstrating just how mainstream the technology has become. It is the obvious choice, even if you are just in the market for a basic voice platform.

Warn’s IT staff actually came to this conclusion three years ago, and twice got a new ShoreTel VoIP system approved before budget cuts put things on hold. However, push came to shove in early 2004 when management decided to move the company’s contact center and marketing team from one Oregon facility to another.

“I told them, not without a new phone system,” said Warn Telecommunications Analyst Toni Mekkers. The 15-year-old Mitel PBX serving Warn’s facility in Milwaukie, Ore. was a veritable antique, and the contact center was being relocated from the headquarters in Clackamas Ore., which had an Avaya system.

In addition to the obsolescence issues, it was a nuisance having two separate phone and voicemail systems. There was no way to balance voice traffic across the two Oregon facilities, which are about five miles apart. One was overloaded while the other had excess capacity, but they couldn’t work together because they were two different systems.

For the same reason, the receptionists at the two facilities couldn’t cover for each other. Warn needed them on a single system, so incoming calls could be routed to the next available operator. Additionally, Warn wanted voicemail and e-mail to be hosted on two different servers, so there would be less chance both would be down at the same time.

The existing call center was also showing its age and limitations. It didn’t support skills-based routing, and reporting capabilities were sketchy. And even minor changes to the call center or PBX configurations required expensive service calls from outside vendors. Mekkers and her staff wanted to be able to control and administer the system internally, avoiding high-priced maintenance contracts and long lead times.

In short, Warn’s management agreed it was time to upgrade and consolidate—and time for VoIP.

Founded in 1948 and acquired by Dover Corp. in 2003, Warn has survived the many vicissitudes of the Information Age by taking a very pragmatic approach to technology. The bleeding edge is not a place you want to be, and new developments are given time to mature and prove themselves. Mekkers and her management are convinced that enterprise VoIP today clearly meets that criteria.



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CHOOSING THE RIGHT VOIP PLATFORM

Mekkers updated her VoIP research and came up with a short list of candidates, which initially included Warn’s existing vendors, Mitel and Avaya, plus Cisco and ShoreTel.

Mekkers had been eyeing Cisco’s VoIP solutions for years, but another Dover subsidiary had recently discarded one after a bad experience. “In my research, about 90% of the people who had bad experiences with VoIP were Cisco users.”

Cisco could do everything Warn wanted, but adding a feature generally meant adding another box, which added to the price and complexity of the overall solution. “Plus, you had to be an engineer to understand the contact center solution,” Mekkers concluded. “They were talking over my head.”

Conversations with Avaya were even less fruitful. The representatives were downright arrogant—an attitude Mekkers and her staff had already encountered when getting support for the Avaya PBX in the Milwaukee plant. “It was a real turnoff, and we stopped things right there,” sums up Mekkers.

That left ShoreTel and Mitel. Mitel’s VoIP system had a very rich feature set, but was also quite complicated. Mekkers and her staff were worried about the user support issues that might ensue.

In contrast, the ShoreTel system was very easy to use, and Mekkers was immediately able to navigate her way around it and make administrative changes. It was also a lot cheaper, partly because Warn could opt to use inexpensive analog phones with it.

As a final test, Mekkers turned a group of users loose on the Mitel and ShoreTel systems, and then surveyed them.

“Our users range from very technologically savvy to very low tech, and include people who have been here for decades and don’t like change. They picked the ShoreTel system hands down, most of them saying it was easier to use,” reports Mekkers. “ShoreTel was also the easiest to implement, and gave us total control.” The survey results validated Mekkers’ own observations, and Warn went live with the ShoreTel system six weeks later.

Warn has 410 employees spread across the two Oregon manufacturing locations, and four more at a technical facility in the Detroit suburb of Livonia. A new ShoreTel system was installed in the Milwaukee site on March 22, and a contact center was added April 5. The old center in Clackamas was taken down the previous Friday night, and the new one was up and running in Milwaukee on Monday morning.

“Our customers didn’t notice,” Mekkers said. “That was cool, because a lot of people were pretty negative, and didn’t think it would work.” Two weeks later, the Clackamas office was added to the ShoreTel system, and all the company’s Oregon employees were on one voice network.



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USERS AND ADMINISTRATORS: TWO THUMBS UP

Change can be very difficult for people, and getting users to move from a very familiar telephone keypad to a PC-based application can be a real challenge. However, ShoreTel’s award-winning Personal Call Manager interface provides users with a lot more than desktop call control. It also represents the keys to the convergence kingdom, delivering such productivity enhancements as visual voicemail and integration with calendars and contact databases. Potential benefits are enormous, but the right introduction is critical.

Mekkers was expecting to encounter a lot of resistance from users, but most of them picked up the ShoreTel system very quickly after one brief training session.

“We wanted to make sure the change didn’t scare people that much, so we put all the phones on the desktops and assured people the new system could always be used like a traditional phone,” says Mekkers. “We told them, everything you see us doing today in the Personal Call Manager, you can do on your phone. The PCM is just something that will help make your jobs easier.”

Initially, a lot of Warn’s employees used the new phone system the same way they had the old one, but they keep discovering new capabilities as they go. Punching out numbers digit by digit on a phone keypad is a lot more trouble than clicking on entries in a contact database, or highlighting a phone number on a web site.

Administration has also been streamlined considerably. The old environment had Mekkers running constantly between two facilities to fix two different phone systems and move people or make other changes. “The remote administration means I can take a real vacation now,” she quips. “As long as I have my laptop with me, I can fix things from just about anywhere.”

The new ShoreTel system has also eliminated the expense and inconvenience of dealing with outside vendors for support. Whenever there was a problem with one of the old voice platforms, it cost \$145 per hour to bring one in. Now, Mekkers and her staff can deal with the problems themselves in minutes.

The added control extends to the users, too. Before, even something simple like setting a new speed-dial number required a call to Mekkers, who would have to trek to the PBX to make the change. “We’re giving them more control, and they are doing their jobs more efficiently. Little things like the follow-me feature that lets the system find you on your cell phone when you are expecting an important call – those things really add up.”

The company also has 25 employees who work at both Oregon sites, and who used to have two different phone numbers and voicemail accounts to deal with. Now, there is a single voicemail system, and phone numbers are attached to people rather than physical lines. The roaming users just log on at their present location, and calls are automatically routed to them.



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A NEXT-GENERATION CONTACT CENTER

Warn sells its products through a two-tier distribution channel, so the bulk of the contact center’s calls are from dealers and distributors. However, there are also calls from consumers looking for a retail outlet, or for help with a product they’ve purchased, or for assistance deciding what to buy.

The previous platform was an Avaya ACD system that worked well but was difficult to set up and configure. An outside service professional had to be called in at considerable cost to make any changes, and the configuration options offered only limited call-routing functionality.

“We couldn’t do any skills-based routing,” recalls contact center manager Matt Bailey. “Calls sometimes went to the wrong agents, and had to be transferred when the agents couldn’t answer the questions.”

The old system was also missing a good reporting system. What it had was not very comprehensive or reliable, and lacked good support by the vendor.

With the ShoreTel contact center solution, Bailey first defined his agent organization, and designated how he wanted calls to be routed among them. He created groups and prioritized the agents within them, so the system could automatically look through the available agents for the one with the best skills set.

For example, a couple of Bailey’s agents are really good at truck calls, while others excel at ATV calls. They have been designated specialists, and calls about these topics automatically get routed to them first. Conversely, if a caller inadvertently gets into the wrong area and is just sitting there, the system automatically intervenes after 3 minutes and bumps the call to the top of the queue.

“Once you figure out how you want calls routed to best serve your customers, the ShoreTel contact center is very easy to configure,” says Bailey, who started at Warn 15 years ago working on the manufacturing floor. “I’m a non-phone guy, and I can go in and make changes to the groups, auto-attendant messages, and routing configurations. Changing the hold message is very easy, because it’s just a matter of putting a new WAVE file on the system.”

The call center is fronted by an auto-attendant that presents callers with various options, and one is a dealer locator that is actually provided by a third-party service. The ShoreTel contact center forwards these calls directly to an 800 number belonging to the locator service, along with the associated Caller ID information needed to match the caller to the closest dealer

The reporting capabilities of the ShoreTel contact center get high marks from Bailey. A lot more data is pulled into the reports, and it is easy to generate reports on an ad hoc basis, or schedule them. Report results are sometimes posted on the company Intranet so everyone can see what’s going on.

Bailey particularly appreciates the real-time reporting feature. The old system had what was called real-time reporting, but it was actually updating every 30 seconds. The ShoreTel system can be set to one second.



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“It’s nice to be able to see from the supervisor’s desk who’s logged in, how many calls are waiting, and so on,” Bailey says. “I can jump in and answer the phone myself if I need to. If you are trying to reach a certain goal for the day, you can see how you are doing.”

The agents went through two days of training on the ShoreTel system prior to the move. The key goal was to assure them that, except for logging in and logging out, they didn’t have to use the PC-based interface and agent toolbar if they really didn’t want to. Once they are logged in, the old functionality is all there on the phone.

Bailey had been worried about the sound quality a VoIP-based contact center could deliver, but acknowledges that what the ShoreTel system delivers is very good. There have been no complaints from agents or callers about sound quality.

LOOKING AHEAD

So far, Warn’s agents all work from a central contact center facility. The company does not experience big cyclical peaks and valleys in call volume, and sees only a 15% to 20% increase in inbound phone calls during the winter.

Still, the virtual call center concept could be very useful in the future. The region has an occasional “snow day,” during which employees are unable to get to the office. “When we have an event like that, it would be nice to have the option of having the agents log in at home and take calls,” Bailey says.

Warn also has 12 salespeople out in the field, and is testing ShoreTel’s softphone with one of them. The softphone encapsulates a full-featured phone in a person’s notebook computer that enables connecting over a broadband network. When the person logs into the enterprise VPN, his calls are automatically routed to him, providing a consistent voice environment customized to this person’s telephony profile whenever and wherever he wants to work. If the experiment is successful, the sales force will gain some enhanced mobility and avoid some long distance charges.

Warn is anticipating some savings from bypassing long-distance carriers and conferencing services. Once the Detroit site is added to the ShoreTel system, some \$800 per month in toll charges will be eliminated. And upgrading to the new ShoreTel software with 6-way conference calling will shave a big chunk of the \$1,500 monthly conference call bill has been running.

Perhaps more importantly, new facilities acquired through future mergers can be integrated very easily. “We’ve proved that by making the decision in January, and then moving the call center and bringing up two sites within six weeks,” asserts Mekkers. “We’ve had very few problems with the ShoreTel system, and our users seem to love it.”

The success of the ShoreTel solution is turning Warn into something of a VoIP trailblazer inside Dover Corp. Mekkers now gets a lot of calls from other Dover subsidiaries that are interested in moving to a converged platform. “They can see the benefits we are getting, and we’ve barely scratched the surface of what this technology can do.”