

NET Quintum Media Gateways Help Global Manufacturer Albany International Corp. Centralize Operations, Boost Productivity and Slash Telecom Costs

Integration with Microsoft OCS and Multiple Legacy PBXs Ensures Successful Staged Migration to Highly Efficient Unified Communications Environment

Ask Barry Duncan, Vice President, IT, about VoIP, and he will make his point of view abundantly clear. VoIP is more than just a way to cut telecom costs. It's an ingredient in a larger recipe for business success.

"If you look at VoIP in isolation, you may save a little money – but you won't have a real impact on the business," he explains. "But if you're leveraging VoIP as part of a broader unified communications strategy, you can substantially impact your company's performance."

And, with NET Quintum's help, that's exactly what Duncan has done. Using the VX Media Gateways and Microsoft OCS, Duncan's team is enabling his company – global advanced textiles-and-material processing market leader Albany International – to centralize shared corporate services, boost staff productivity, and drive down telecom costs.

Just as important, Albany International Corp. is achieving these objectives in a disciplined, staged manner that is neither overwhelming the company's IT resources, nor causing unacceptable disruption to the business.

Unified communications in a strategic business context

Albany International is the world's leading producer of custom-designed fabrics and belts essential to the production of paper and paperboard. Albany's family of emerging businesses extends its advanced textiles and materials capabilities into a variety of other industries, most notably aerospace composites, nonwovens, building products, and high-performance industrial doors.

In order to maintain its competitive position in today's challenging global marketplace, Albany has been moving to a shared services model. So rather than having business operations such as procurement, finance, and customer care distributed across its various international locations, the company is consolidating and centralizing them.

This obviously drives greater volume of communications between Albany's widely dispersed locations. By leveraging the MPLS-based global data network that Albany put in place a few years earlier, Duncan's team recognized that VoIP would allow this additional office-to-office voice traffic to be carried without adding to the company's telecom costs. VoIP would thus be a key enabler of Albany's consolidation/centralization strategy.

To make this strategy work, Albany also needed to optimize the productivity of its shared services staff. This made Microsoft Office Communications Server very attractive. With OCS, Albany would be able to take advantage of features such as rich presence detection, the ability to choose the communication method that most suits employee needs, and Exchange-based voicemail to simplify everyday tasks and cut down on phone tag. VoIP would thus be a key enabler of Albany's workforce productivity strategy.

Of course, the use of its MPLS network to carry voice traffic would also allow the company to bypass the PSTN for much of its international calling. And, over the long term, the right VoIP solution would (in conjunction with Microsoft OCS) let the company retire its diverse, aging PBX infrastructure – which carried with it some fairly burdensome ongoing ownership costs.

"There were several compelling reasons to migrate to a converged environment," says Duncan. "The only question was how to best accomplish that migration, given the specific attributes of our existing enterprise telecom infrastructure."

Choosing the right VoIP solution

Once Duncan and his team made a decision to move ahead with their convergence plans, they undertook an exhaustive search and evaluation of available VoIP gateway solutions.

One of the main issues impacting Albany's selection criteria was the diversity of PBXs in use across its 31 worldwide locations. These included PBXs from Avaya, Alcatel, Siemens, and others. Any VoIP solution Albany selected would have to work with all of these different brands. "Understanding your global telecommunications environment and associated intricacies is crucial during this process," according to Tom Rice, Communications Architect with Albany International.

Also, the company's long-term plan was to eventually retire its PBXs. Its VoIP infrastructure therefore had to be sufficiently robust to provide complete calling capabilities in conjunction with Microsoft OCS.

That naturally meant that any VoIP infrastructure solution Albany implemented would have to integrate well with OCS. In fact, it would have to provide integration with all the Microsoft components of Albany's enterprise environment – including OCS, Exchange, and Active Directory. Rice states, "The ability to perform intelligent routing with Enterprise Directory-based Dialing will not only provide flexibility but will simplify and consolidate management".

Many other evaluation criteria were considered, too. Among these were security, ease of management, and call processing capabilities.

In addition to assessing VoIP hardware solutions themselves, Duncan and his team carefully considered the companies behind them. In particular, Duncan wanted to be sure that any VoIP hardware vendor he chose would be able to provide the support and expertise the company needed to deal with any technical challenges they might encounter during their extended migration plan. This was especially important in light of both the scope of Albany's convergence initiative and the demands already being placed on Albany's technical staff.

Duncan also needed to have a lot of confidence in the vendor's long-term technology roadmap.

"When you're looking several years out in your IT strategy, you have to have a strong sense that your partners are going to be able to respond to unforeseen changes in technology and in the market," Duncan notes. "If Microsoft changes direction at some point while we're in the process of moving to a converged communications environment, we're going to need our VoIP hardware partner to be able to change direction accordingly, too."

NET: The right partner with the right solution

After completing the initial stages of their evaluation, Duncan and his team created a "short list" of VoIP vendors whose solutions they would test in-house under production conditions. In this stage of the evaluation, units were placed in the company's Albany, New York headquarters and Lithia Springs, Georgia data center – as well as in a manufacturing facility located in Kaukauna, Wisconsin. This test setup allowed Duncan and his team to see if each vendor's VoIP solution would actually perform as promised.

The VX Media Gateway made the cut because it fulfilled all of the company's key criteria – including broad PBX support, robust call processing, strong security features, management functionality, and Microsoft Certification in the Unified Communications arena.

"Integration with Active Directory is particularly important, since it will allow call routing to be driven by what's going on in AD," explains Duncan. "So, for example, calls can automatically be routed to users wherever they are based on the presence information that has been relayed to AD."

While the primary purpose of the test was to validate each vendor's claims about its VoIP hardware, it also wound up revealing which vendor was best able to deliver the kind of expertise and support Albany would likely require in the coming months and years.

NET Quintum excelled in this regard. They brought highly skilled engineers on-site, unlike other vendors who merely provided telephone access to their technical staff. And these engineers weren't just experts in their own gateways' technologies, they were also knowledgeable about the various PBXs Albany had in place.

By the time the testing was complete, it was clear that NET Quintum was the right choice. Only the VX Media Gateways provided the interoperability and call management functionality Albany required to place 7-digit phone calls between any pair of endpoints, to include voicemails in users' Exchange mailboxes, to gain presence awareness for users with IP phones, and to administer their VoIP hardware in a common manner with their OCS servers.

"When you're embarking on a project that is this complex and that can potentially have such a big impact on your company, you want to have the utmost confidence in both the technology you're using and the company behind that technology," declares Duncan. "With NET Quintum and the VX Media Gateway, we have that confidence."

Fulfilling the near- and long-term requirements of the business

Having made the decision to go with VX Media gateways, Duncan and his team were able to start moving forward with their long-range plan for Albany. Rather than doing a costly and disruptive overhaul of the company's entire global telecommunications infrastructure, Albany has installed VX Media Gateways at a few carefully selected locations at a time. In some cases, these locations were selected because the PBX was nearing the end of its useful life – and therefore a good candidate for eventual replacement with the combination of a VX Media Gateway and Microsoft OCS. In others, it was because the location's users were particularly good candidates for using VoIP and OCS to achieve productivity gains. In still others, it was because the high volume of voice traffic made the cost savings available from VoIP most attractive.

Users in these locations are already raving about the benefits of having their voicemail routed to their Exchange mailboxes and being able to detect the presence of their colleagues down the hall or in another country. "If you know someone isn't at their desk, you can just send them an email instead of trying to call them first," says Duncan. "Apparently minor advantages like that really add up when you're communicating with people day and day out."

Duncan adds that his confidence in NET Quintum has only grown since the initial production test. "When a market is still developing – as is the case with convergence – it's important to see your vendors adapting to the lessons that companies are learning as they go," he says. "In the case of NET Quintum, we've already seen them add and modify features based on our input and that of their other customers."

Duncan also advises other IT executives planning similar convergence implementations to be very deliberate about choosing a VoIP hardware partner – and to not fall into the trap of thinking that the biggest vendors are the safest vendors. "One thing we realized along the way is that the dominant companies in this space are not always the best at integrating with other vendor's equipment – because their real intent is to get you locked into their own end-to-end solution," Duncan observes. "NET Quintum's approach, which is to co-exist with a full range of third-party technologies, makes much more sense in terms of both immediate deployment and future adaptability to potentially unforeseen technical requirements."