City Communicates Effectively Across Enterprise

City of Opelika, Alabama adopts Cisco Unified Communications for improved voice, paging, and fax.

Business Challenge

The city of Opelika in eastern Alabama is a charming and heritage-rich area that is growing rapidly. The City of Opelika works hard to keep up with the community growth while maintaining a high quality of life for its 25,000 residents. Within the 150 square miles served by the city are 21 buildings housing city offices—everything from police and fire departments to parks and recreation. The various departments and divisions were struggling with an outdated Centrex phone system that was hampering communications, and which the vendor would no longer maintain. Not only was the equipment limited and out of date, but it was wearing out and the city was replacing expensive station equipment almost weekly.

Executive Summary

City of Opelika
- Opelika, Alabama
- 375 workers/employees

Industry
- City Government

Business Challenge
- Outdated phone system hampered communications
- Public safety data could not coincide with local data

Network Solution
- Cisco Unified Wireless Network for in-building coverage
- Wireless mesh network for mobile public safety departments
- Unified communications deployed over a new network infrastructure
- Third-party applications for paging and unified faxing

Business Results
- City communicating effectively across all departments
- Improved public safety communication with plans for additional wireless applications

"Only five out of our more than 300 phone lines had voicemail, and we were really struggling with that," says John Findley, IT director for the City of Opelika, noting that department receptionists were hand-writing messages or walking down hallways to alert people of calls. "When the receptionist was busy, some calls would just ring and ring and not get answered at all." Faxes were also an issue. Workers would create a fax document on their computer, print it and walk it over to a fax machine. This not only used up time and paper, but the police department was concerned about security and privacy issues with the sensitive documents that it handles.

"I wanted all of the city workers, whether they have desks or work out in the field, to have voicemail, and I wanted to make better use of our computer systems," says Findley. "These days, there is no reason to have to record contact information in multiple places. I wanted to enable everyone to use the Microsoft Office contacts that everyone has on their computers to make phone calls and send and receive faxes right from their systems."

Additionally, Findley wanted a network solution that would enable the data that resided with the city's public safety departments to coincide with the local data. This would support improved public safety, and help Findley reach his goal of ultimately enabling the public safety departments of the neighboring sister city and Opelika to transparently share data.

Findley had already overseen the upgrade of the Cisco data network, and with these new Cisco® core routing and switches in place, he could procure funding for a new phone system. After issuing a RFP (request for proposal), Findley chose Atlanta, Georgia-based

Digitel Corporation. Digitel is a Cisco Premier Certified Partner with a strong background in telephony that has earned it a Cisco Specialization in Advanced Unified Communications. The firm also has plenty of experience working with the public sector, and understands the specific needs and challenges of a city government.

Network Solution

"The City of Opelika needed a way to communicate effectively across the enterprise," says Matt Leszynski, account executive for Digitel Corporation. "A converged data network with unified communications was the first major step. It also needed overhead paging capabilities to broadcast messages citywide or to specific groups."

Leszynski and the Digitel team recommended Cisco Unified Communications. The Cisco infrastructure in place would support unified communications, which would provide the voicemail and communications features city workers needed, as well as provide a platform for additional applications and support the City's planned growth. Digitel recommended Cisco Unified Communications Manager, and Cisco Unity for unified messaging, as well as Cisco 7941, 7961, 7921 and 7936 Unified IP Phones.

The Digitel team also recommended additional applications from Cistera and Xmedius for the City's paging and unified faxing needs. Cistera is a leading provider of enterprise application platforms and engines for IP Communications, and its Event Alerting and Notification solution is easily integrated into Cisco Unified Communications. The Cistera applications services are delivered via the Cistera Convergence Server. The solutions allow any city employee or worker, from any city phone, to send out an informative or emergency broadcast message. The messages can be sent citywide, or to a specified group such as department or building.

To simply faxing, Digitel recommended the boardless XMediusFAX IP fax server solution from Sagem-Interstar (formerly Interstar Technologies). XMediusFAX is a fast, secure, and robust IP fax server solution ideal for organizations transitioning to a Cisco voice over IP (VoIP) solution, enabling faxes to share a common inbox, along with e-mail and voicemail.

"Deployment of Cisco VoIP network infrastructures are really growing, yet many organizations often overlook the need for fax over IP and continue paying for costly POTS [basic telephone service] lines," says Leszynski. "By including faxing with a Cisco Unified Communications solution, a company optimizes their investment and can enjoy even stronger ROI [return on investment]."

With an eye to the future, the Digitel and city teams also looked at deploying a solution that would provide guest Internet access in some city buildings, and a Cisco wireless network mesh network that would enable public safety departments to coincide with the local data.

"Economic development is big consideration for the City of Opelika," says Leszynski. "It is important to encourage people to come downtown and patronize the restaurants, shops, and other businesses in the downtown Opelika area. The city wanted to make sure that it had a strong network solution in place that would allow public safety communication downtown to seamlessly work with the city's network and communications."

The deployment included Cisco Aironet 1131 access points and WLAN controller model 4404, which provided guest access so visitors in city buildings would have Internet access, and a Cisco Unified Wireless Network also features two Cisco wireless mesh 1510s that would enable the fire department, police department, and the city's Emergency Operations Center (Emergency Management) to coincide with the local data.

Business Results

With its new converged network and Cisco Unified Communications system in place, the city of Opelika is enjoying new productivity and peace of mind. They are enjoying the little features, such as Findley being able to call his voicemail during his drive home and leave himself a message of items that need taken care of; and the big things like city services and emergency personnel communicating with each other transparently. And because the Cistera solution provides the means to digitally record and archive each transmission, emergency response is faster and more efficient, and post-event analysis is now possible.

Additionally, no one ever misses a call and no caller to a city department is ever left waiting while a phone rings endlessly.

The Cisco solution designed and deployed for the City of Opelika by Digitel enables the city to look to the future. For instance, Findley is currently looking at additional wireless software applications for the transmission of work orders for use in the public works and electric utility departments, and for upload and download access to information for the city's building inspectors and code enforcement officers. Opelika is also the county seat, and, realizing that police vehicles do not always stop at the city limits, Findley wants to eventually enable the city's mesh network for the county sheriff's mobile data terminals and for the public safety vehicles for the neighboring city of Auburn to all have the ability to connect to the network.

As the city continues its mobile data implementation, it is planning for the deployment of new dispatching software to support AVL (automatic vehicle location) of all police units. The city can then send mobile mapping information and call location to units in the field.

"Our new network and communications system has unified the city departments in very powerful ways," says Findley. "Our voicemail and fax issues are solved, and we have empowered our users with new and modern features. The system has gotten the attention of the Fire Chief and the Electrical Department and others about how they could communicate via video, so we will consider adding that in the future. We now have a technology platform that will make a big impact on public service and public safety."

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