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TECH TRENDS

Implementing Unified Communications

Convergence platforms bring schools eased maintenance and enhanced productivity.

Karen D. Schwartz

Five years ago, Elmore County Schools in Wetumpka, Ala., was struggling with an aging PBX phone and intercom system.

The school system's 400 phone lines serving 11,000 students, 15 school campuses and 1,200 teachers and employees was dying a slow death, says Davis Brock, former director of technology. With the help of a technology grant from the Elmore County Board of Education, the IT department upgraded its infrastructure with the goal of deploying a state-of-the-art system that would revolutionize communication throughout the district.

Like many K–12 school districts, Elmore County Schools turned to unified communications — a system that combines different types of media, such as audio and video, sometimes with more advanced capabilities such as collaboration and presence.

The overall goal of unified communications is to improve user communication, productivity and efficiency while reducing human latency and decision-making time, says Sara Radicati, president of The Radicati Group. Unified communications technology has relevance in many organizational settings and has proved to be a worthy cost-saving and travel-reducing solution, she says.

Saving Time and Money

In addition to upgrading the infrastructure, Elmore County Schools' Brock wanted to create a more integrated communication system that would reduce maintenance issues — and do it as inexpensively as possible.

After evaluating solutions, Brock's team chose a converged voice and data network solution from Cisco. After upgrading all classrooms, labs and offices to Cisco 10/100 switches with fiber uplink connectivity, the team and its partners deployed Cisco Unified Communications Manager at 18 locations in the district.

"Now, when bad weather is on the way, the superintendent can punch a couple of buttons on his phone and reach every hallway and classroom immediately," Brock explains. "And if we need to add a phone number to a particular extension, we don't have to call somebody to do it; we can do it internally."

Brock says the system has saved the school district a lot of money — more than $250,000, according to a recent return on investment study done by an independent company.

Cost savings was a major driver for adding unified communications to the infrastructure in Manteca Unified School District, too. The Central California district's 30 schools and administrative offices now enjoy a full unified communications setup, says Colby Clark, systems administrator supervisor.

> 75 million: Number of on-premises enterprise unified communications users by 2013, which represents an annual average growth rate of 20 percent.
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> Source: The Radicati Group

The system, which has been in place for about two years, comprises Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, which centralizes and stores voicemail and e-mail messages, and Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007, which allows for instant messaging and presence awareness.

The school district opted to keep its Cisco Call Manager VoIP solution, which integrates well with the Microsoft software.

"They work really well together," Clark explains. "When somebody on staff doesn't pick up and the message goes to voicemail, it transfers the call to our Exchange 2007 server, which sends a voicemail message to the user's mailbox."

The unified communications features have proved useful. Teachers who don't have phones in their classrooms, for example, can still receive voicemail messages from parents because those messages are sent to the teachers' e-mail. And parents can call in a child's absence to the school's absence hotline; the message will show up in the inbox of the attendance clerk's computer.

For more on unified communications, check out our E-newsletter

Moving Forward

In the coming years, Radicati expects product evolution, incorporating such technologies as social networking, to make the concept of unified communications even more appealing. For example, by combining the two, users might be able to access a click-to-dial feature while browsing a colleague on a business social network.

"There continues to be significant change in the unified communications market, and these changes are moving UC into more common use within organizations," she says.

A Good Call

Follow these tips for deploying unified communications:

- Poll your users and department heads about their communication needs.
- Prioritize your organization's needs (audio, video, collaboration) and choose a solution with strengths in those areas.
- Build on what you already have. For example, if you have voicemail and e-mail, you can add video conferencing to the mix with the help of a good integrator.
- Evaluate your current network and communication infrastructure and make sure it can support any systems you are considering.
- Make sure the system you choose is fully integrated with your security infrastructure.
- Deploy the system in phases by department or function to catch problems early.
- Before rolling out the system, fully train your staff about how the new system works.