

Voting for VoIP

For Swingvote, an ambitious shareholder-communications company, VoIP and business continuity go hand in hand.

By Karen D. Schwartz



Photo: Bob Mahoney

Swingvote's Robert Baitis and Diana Bourke say the VoIP infrastructure makes it easy to provide onsite and remote access — a nice business-continuity benefit.

As a new entrant in the intricate and old-school world of shareholder voting, Swingvote had something to prove — that it was as reliable and responsive as its competitors and offered technological advantages, too. To achieve that, the Atlanta company decided from day one to be as innovative as possible, both in its business planning and its implementation of technology.

“Potential clients aren’t going to make a switch unless they are fully convinced that we have the kind of robust policies, practices and procedures in place that large companies do,” explains Diana Bourke, Swingvote’s chief operating officer. “That means we have to think big but act small, by putting everything in place that larger companies do but keeping the nimble, innovative, entrepreneurial spirit of a small company.”

Because the company is in a business where timing is critical — it automates the traditionally paper-based process of shareholder communications and voting with an online platform that allows shareholders to educate themselves and vote quickly and easily — remaining up and running and staying responsive at all times are key.

“Proxy voting is one of those industries where there is a cut-off date with no leeway,” Bourke explains. “If you don’t get the ballot in, it doesn’t count, so if we crash, our customer is harmed.”

That makes system availability mission-critical. To that end, Swingvote has implemented a system of redundant servers and network infrastructure, replicating its Atlanta headquarters setup in Dallas. In addition, it’s also establishing another “warm” site in Georgia to further ensure that it won’t experience any outages during a key electronic-proxy campaign.

Business Continuity and Customer Assurance

But for Swingvote, which must remain committed and responsive to its clients at all times, even triple redundancy wasn’t enough. That got IT manager Robert Baitis and his senior network engineer thinking about how to ensure that Swingvote employees were as responsive as possible during any type of calamity.

The company had recently implemented a Cisco Systems Voice over IP system to replace its aging PBX phone system. And what if, Baitis asked, they could ensure that the new VoIP system also played a part in the company’s business-continuity strategy?

Baitis and his staff were thinking about the Cisco Unified Communications Manager system the company had just installed, an IP telephony call-processing system that provides voice, video, mobility and presence services. As part of the installation, each of the company’s 65 employees had been issued either a Cisco VoIP 7941 or 7970 phone.

“For redundancy and business-continuity purposes,” Baitis explains, with a VoIP infrastructure, it would be possible to configure the system “to continue working remotely from home via the virtual private network.”

There is great value in having the capability for employees to work from home in

BizTech Quick Poll

Where does your company

the event of a disaster in the building or the area, especially in Swingvote's line of business. "If people can't get into the office, they can get on their VoIP phone or softphone and it looks to the outside world exactly as if they were in the office," Bourke says.

For example, Swingvote's issuer-services group, which contacts companies to collect information for proxy voting, must reach people in a timely manner. It's critical for this group to be able to answer incoming calls without having them sent to voice mail; and with VoIP technology, even if the group had to work off-site, calls would be redirected to them and they could answer as if they were in the office.

The importance of comprehensive business-continuity planning has been borne out in numerous studies. For example, a study performed by GCR Custom Research for Hewlett-Packard found that more than 80 percent of IT decision-makers at large and midsize businesses view business continuity and availability — a major part of disaster recovery — as a high priority for 2008 and beyond.

The VoIP capability also can be used by Swingvote's call-center customer-support team, which supports broker/dealers. If a client has an issue, a Swingvote employee can be reached immediately to identify and resolve concerns, Bourke says.

And once the company moves forward with its plan to develop a nearby fail-over site that will also include space and facilities for employees to work, the system will be complete, with all VoIP features fully functional from a business-continuity standpoint. Once that happens, Baitis says, phone service can be rerouted within minutes to the fail-over site simply by changing a network switch. When that occurs, the business-continuity component of the VoIP network will reach its full potential, he says.

On the Cutting Edge

Although using VoIP in a business-continuity context isn't that common yet, it's an innovative way of improving employee availability and puts companies like Swingvote on the cutting edge, says David Lemelin, senior analyst for the business markets group at In-Stat, a Scottsdale, Ariz., consultancy.

"At this point, it's not top-of-mind in planning a business-continuity strategy; that is, people don't often consciously think about improving their business continuity with VoIP, although 25 percent of businesses have implemented VoIP," says Lemelin. "But it's great for businesses of any size."

Part of the reason, surmises Jon Arnold, principal of J Arnold & Associates, a Toronto-based consultancy with a focus on IP communications, is because land-line phone service has been so reliable for such a long time that companies take a relaxed attitude toward VoIP in general.

But those companies are missing the boat, Arnold says.

"Many businesses still believe VoIP is too new and not trustworthy enough to be used in this way, but soon enough, they will make the connection between business continuity and the need to keep communications lines open," he says. "And by extension, they will see that VoIP is a great solution."

VoIP phone systems usually come standard with voice mail, call waiting, three-way calling, caller ID, call blocking, 411 capabilities and automatic redial of the last number called. They also have large address books, color navigation screens, a paging feature, a headset jack and walkie-talkie functionality between handsets.

But in terms of business continuity, the most useful feature of VoIP phones is the find-me/follow-me feature, which allows calls to find the user wherever they are. "Find-me" permits users to forward calls to any location, while "follow-me" allows the user to be reached at whatever numbers he or she specifies, either sequentially or in a preferred order.

stand when it comes to VoIP adoption?

40% We currently use VoIP.

38% We have no plans to deploy VoIP.

16% We are evaluating VoIP.

6% We are implementing VoIP.

Source: CDW poll of 537 BizTech readers

Although VoIP phones have plenty of business-continuity-friendly features, some companies may choose to offer softphones as well. Simply put, a softphone consists of a software program that runs on a notebook or desktop, allowing users to make and receive calls through a VoIP connection. With a softphone, it's possible to talk using VoIP without having a physical phone, although you might need headphones. With a softphone, it's particularly easy to reroute calls.

In the case of Swingvote, employees have a choice of using a standard Cisco VoIP phone or adding a Cisco softphone client installed on a notebook or desktop system with a wireless headset. Softphone technology is especially useful in the case of building inaccessibility, Baitis says.

For now, only about 10 employees have chosen the softphone option, mirroring recent research from In-Stat that indicates that only about 9 percent of VoIP end users in small businesses report having a softphone on a notebook. Lemelin expects that number to rise.

No matter what technology you choose to implement, it pays to think through how you will fit it into your business-continuity plan, Lemelin says.

"Think about how you're going to manage calls in a fashion that is transparent to customers and have a plan for how people will log on, get remote access and ensure that they understand where everybody is in the face of disaster," he says.

Swingvote did all of that and more.

"We examined every part of [the VoIP system], including how to be effective in delivering services to our clients both on a short- and long-term basis, no matter what the situation," Bourke says. "Because of the industry we're in and the pressures we face, we've made decisions that may not seem intuitive to many people, but are really a very important part of the package we're bringing to the table."

Swingvote's Business-Continuity Infrastructure

- An operations center in Atlanta, located within company headquarters, that houses a set of servers, storage and network infrastructure, including the VoIP setup
- Cisco Unified Communications Manager IT telephony call-processing system, housed at the Atlanta operations center
- Two redundant Cisco 3560 core switches
- Two Cisco 3560 PoE switches servicing the VoIP infrastructure
- Cisco Virtual Private Network (VPN)
- Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) trunking to provision the VoIP connection
- 65 Cisco 7941- and 7970-model VoIP phones
- About 10 Cisco softphone clients for use with notebooks or desktops
- A redundant set of servers, storage and network infrastructure in a Dallas data center
- A redundant set of server, storage and network infrastructure in a Georgia data center, where employees could work if the office was unavailable (in process)



CEO Takeaway

Although implementing VoIP is a great step in ensuring continuity of business processes, it's only one spoke in the wheel. You'll also want to:

- Create a detailed business-continuity plan that spells out what's necessary, how essential employees will conduct business and communicate during a crisis, and how the company's assets will be protected;
- Move from tape-based backups to disk-based backups to reduce problems associated with human error,

simplify the data-restoration process and enable data to be transported off-site more easily;

- Train employees to handle tasks they might not otherwise perform;
- Test your system. No plan is foolproof, so testing the plan periodically is critical. According to an AT&T study on business continuity, only 41 percent of companies had actually tested their business-continuity plans within the past 12 months.