



Innovation with Unified Communications

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Manufacturing—Consumer goods manufacturing

Customer Profile

Based in Nashville, Tennessee, the Gibson Guitar Corporation is a leading manufacturer of electric guitars and other instruments. It has 2,000 employees in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Business Situation

Gibson—a company with a reputation for entrepreneurship and innovation—wanted to streamline communications between offices around the world, enabling faster decisions and lowering costs.

Solution

Gibson deployed Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 and Exchange Server 2007, introducing real-time presence and greater communications flexibility into its environment.

Benefits

- Lowers implementation costs by 25 percent
- Reduces calling costs by up to 75 percent
- Speeds decision making
- Streamlines IT administration

“We’re a very entrepreneurial company, always doing new things and launching new ventures around the world. Office Communications Server 2007 will definitely make that process easier.”

Michael Johnson, Chief Information Officer, Gibson Guitar Corporation

The Gibson Guitar Corporation makes some of the best-known electric guitars in the world, including the Les Paul models and the famous Flying V. To stay competitive, Gibson employees need to share information and make decisions rapidly, but this can be challenging with operations located across the United States, Europe, and Asia. The manufacturer sought a unified communications solution that would give its employees a way to see when their colleagues around the world were available and how best to reach them. Gibson chose to deploy a solution based on Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 and Exchange Server 2007. The Microsoft solution cost about 25 percent less to deploy than the alternatives. Since the deployment, Gibson is seeing better collaboration between offices and expects to save from 50 to 75 percent in international phone charges.

Situation

Whether you're listening to the Delta blues, the British Invasion, or the soon-to-be-discovered band playing in a tiny nightclub downtown, there's a good chance that the guitar you're hearing was made by the Gibson Guitar Corporation. Founded in 1902 and headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, Gibson has been a leading manufacturer of fine electric guitars since 1935. Gibson is also the third-largest piano manufacturer in China and produces Baldwin pianos in the United States. The company makes Wurlitzer jukeboxes in Germany and a variety of other instruments including, but not limited to, bass guitars, acoustic guitars, mandolins, and drums. Although Gibson manages many global brands, every Gibson-branded instrument is manufactured in the United States.

Gibson is also a lifestyle company. Its Web site showcases work by writers and editors from the world's leading music magazines. Visitors to the site can read music news and watch video interviews with artists. They can enter contests, learn about new products, and even take guitar lessons online using a combination of audio, video, and sheet music. Gibson also plans to unveil a designer line of clothing for men in early 2008, and the company is opening its own chain of retail locations around the world that sell the whole range of Gibson products.

The company's international success is due to the hard work and dedication of its 1,000 employees across Europe, the United States, and Japan, and another 2,500 workers in its manufacturing plants in China. This global presence brings both opportunities and challenges because employees collaborate across multiple time zones.

"Because there are very short time windows in which we can communicate freely with our distributors and employees overseas,

reliable, cost-effective, and timely communications are very important to us," says Kathy Benner, Director of Information Technology at Gibson. "Whenever someone doesn't respond because of a missed e-mail or voice-mail message, there's an opportunity cost. For example, a sales representative might be trying to get one of our pianos featured on a morning television program. If we don't come through in time, it might be a competitor's product on the screen instead."

Gibson had used Microsoft® Exchange Server 2003 and Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2005 Standard Edition for years. Its customer service and sales departments adopted Microsoft Office Communicator 2005 to give customers an easy way to reach a company representative in real time. Employees also used a variety of other communications tools: WebEx for IT troubleshooting and remote training, Skype for voice over IP (VoIP) communication, and various free instant-messaging programs including MSN® Messenger Services.

The lack of standardization and control created a security risk because Gibson had to open its firewall to unsupported third-party applications, and it had no way to verify that messages leaving the company network were secure. Adding to the inconsistency was the variety of telephony solutions that Gibson had in place: it supported Private Branch Exchange (PBX) systems from seven different vendors in the United States and many more at its locations around the world.

Michael Johnson, Chief Information Officer at Gibson, says, "We're a very goal-oriented company. We track our progress and monitor our goals and objectives every single day, so not being able to communicate effectively with counterparts in other time zones was a big constraint for us."

Employees knew that at any given moment key decision makers in other offices might be working late, or early, or from home, or might be away from their computers but reachable by cell phone. However, employees couldn't be certain of who was and was not available and how best to reach them. Gibson decided to improve its ability to share information and make decisions quickly by upgrading its communications systems across the company.

Gibson wanted to streamline and standardize its e-mail and instant messaging software. It also wanted to migrate most of its telephony from PBX installations to routers and IP phones at each location, with one or two local phone lines available for 911 calls and backup during power outages. Its ideal communications solution would be secure, easy to deploy, and easy to use. It would also include a rich set of useful features and would integrate with the company's existing systems to minimize hardware and software replacement.

Solution

Gibson considered a number of messaging and telephony solutions from vendors such as Avaya, Nortel, and Cisco. It was on the verge of choosing the Cisco product when a conversation with a Microsoft representative about renewing its three-year enterprise licensing agreement brought the Microsoft unified communications solution to its attention.

"I liked the high level of security, the good user experience, and the minimal training required. Microsoft lends itself to our environment extremely well," says Benner.

Johnson adds, "Every other solution involved replacing several of our existing systems, some of which were only a couple of years old. If we did that, we'd spend roughly half a million dollars, which is a huge investment.

The Microsoft unified communications solution was very appealing because we could deploy it on top of our existing environment instead of having to rip out and replace equipment at locations all over the world."

In June 2007, Gibson deployed Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 and the Office Communicator 2007 client. The company also implemented Exchange Server 2007 with Unified Messaging and the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2007 messaging and collaboration client. The solution's presence and messaging features integrate with other software in use at Gibson, such as Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007 and the Active Directory® service.

On the telephony side, Gibson integrated a AudioCodes Mediant 1000 Quad gateway with a 23-channel PRI card on its Nortel BCM400 PBX. The company configured several Polycom CX700 IP phones for its users and deployed Microsoft RoundTable™ conferencing and collaboration devices. RoundTable offers synchronized voice and video conferencing with a 360-degree, panoramic view of everyone in the conference room.

Enabling Technologies, a global Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, aided Gibson with the deployment. Enabling Technologies specializes in unified communications, Exchange Server 2007, Office Communication Server 2007, IM, and messaging-compliance applications. Its engineers have more than 50 years of combined experience in deploying messaging technology to companies around the globe.

"Enabling Technologies has been a good resource for troubleshooting the solution, and ensuring that our implementation is stable and reliable," says Benner.

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Kathy Benner, Director of Information Technology, Gibson Guitar Corporation

The initial deployment took place at the company's headquarters in Nashville, with some users connected in Europe and Japan. With the presence awareness features in Office Communications Server 2007, these users are now able to quickly check the availability of other employees: who is online and who isn't, and whether the people who are online are free to talk, busy, in a meeting, or traveling. With a click of a button, they can initiate an instant-message conversation, a phone call, or a video conference. The company's ultimate goal is to put the solution into the hands of every one of its 600 office staff members and mobile workers around the world.

Gibson employees who frequently work out of the office are integrating the mobile aspects of the solution with their daily life and work. They use Office Communicator 2007 through the public Internet and Microsoft Office Communicator Web Access to communicate on the go, and the access files on Office SharePoint Server 2007 and on company directories with Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access. Gibson will soon deploy Microsoft Office Communicator Mobile to employees in key management positions who use Windows Mobile® powered devices. Once it receives feedback from those users, it intends to deploy Office Communicator Mobile companywide.

Benefits

By deploying a communications solution based on Office Communications Server 2007, Gibson can realize its goals of helping employees around the world share information and make decisions more quickly. The solution addressed cost concerns by proving to be much less expensive than other vendors' alternatives. The company also sees strong backing for its global ventures and simplified IT support through a more streamlined and standardized communications system.

Lowers Implementation Costs by 25 Percent

Comparing the Microsoft unified communications solution with others on the market, Gibson expects a significant cost savings from going with Microsoft.

"Based on current IP phone prices, labor costs, and the cost of server computer hardware, implementing Microsoft unified communications costs about 25 percent less than solutions from any other vendor that we looked at," says Benner. She adds that because Gibson has in-house resources with knowledge of and experience with Microsoft technologies, it can implement the bulk of the technology itself and avoid the costs of bringing in a vendor to do the job.

From the standpoint of IT administration, Gibson sees the Microsoft solution once again providing significant savings over other options. "With the Microsoft unified communications solution, we don't need to hire a person certified by Nortel or Avaya to handle account creation, moves, and changes," says Benner. "It's all managed within Active Directory, Exchange Server 2007, and Office Communications Server 2007, so our existing networking group can do everything itself. It gives us more control over our environment and how we choose to manage it, and saves us about \$50,000 a year."

Reduces Calling Costs by up to 75 Percent

Gibson expects another significant cost savings in reduced long-distance telephone charges. Gibson employees in the United States speak daily with their counterparts in Europe and Asia to get up-to-date operational metrics. "We pay quite a bit in long-distance charges every month. By using Office Communications Server 2007, we hope to

reduce that by 50 to 75 percent," says Benner.

A key element in transitioning users from the current telephone system to VoIP is the introduction of IP phones. The new phones must be as comfortable to use as employees' current phones and offer features that take full advantage of unified communications. Gibson has given Polycom CX700 IP phones to all employees at the company's home office, and they are currently using them alongside their normal desk phones.

"The Polycom CX700 IP phone is very user-friendly, very intuitive, so it's not a challenge for people to learn at all," says Benner. "The ability to look somebody up by name as opposed to having to search for their four-digit extension is a huge benefit. When people change divisions, their new phone extensions don't always get updated in Active Directory, and it can be very frustrating trying to reach them. Now, all you need is a name and you can reach anyone. It's going to be a huge timesavings."

Another timesaving aspect that makes the new phones attractive to Gibson employees is the presence awareness feature. Employees can see the availability of the people they want to call in Office Communicator 2007 or on the display panel of the IP phone itself. If people are in meetings or away from their desks, it saves a phone call that would otherwise be wasted.

Speeds Decision Making

Gibson reports a dramatic improvement in its employees' ability to share information and make decisions faster. It expects that this will improve its operations worldwide.

"We're a very entrepreneurial company, always doing new things and launching new ventures around the world. Office Communications Server 2007 will definitely

make that process easier. It'll help us overcome the obstacles we face when communicating with colleagues and partners in other countries," Johnson says.

"For example, say that we start up a new business in Japan. Using e-mail alone, it can take days to make a decision that could be made in 15 minutes of real-time conversation. But there's a finite window of opportunity to reach people by phone or instant messaging, because our business hours overlap with theirs for only a few minutes at the end of the day. Knowing who is available and how to reach them will be one of the biggest benefits of Office Communications Server 2007."

Gibson also expects that its sales revenue will increase as better communications shrinks the number of missed opportunities and increases the visibility of its products. Users are developing the habit of placing calls through their workstations rather than their PBX phones, so that they can work without interruption while they speak with their counterparts in other offices. Through federated communications, they can use Office Communications Server 2007 to reach employees at one IT vendor and several major media companies as easily as they can reach other Gibson employees.

Streamlines IT Administration

By standardizing and consolidating its voice and messaging environment, Gibson is able to eliminate several time-consuming processes and support issues.

The ability to securely access files remotely using Office Outlook Web Access, Office Communicator 2007 through the public Internet, and the Outlook Anywhere feature of Exchange Server 2007 reduces the need to send files back and forth using e-mail. This keeps mailbox sizes down and helps individuals and departments control their

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document versions better. It also reduces the need to provide users with virtual private network (VPN) access to the company’s file system. Less VPN traffic reduces the amount of bandwidth used by employees and frees Gibson network engineers from having to talk users through the connection process and troubleshoot it when it fails.

Gibson is streamlining its IT environment in other ways. By standardizing on Office Communications Server 2007, the company will be able to phase out WebEx, which will result in fewer software licenses to manage and fewer disparate systems to maintain and troubleshoot. Unsupported third-party VoIP clients such as Skype will also be unnecessary. Instead, Gibson will have the ability to escalate instant-messaging conversations to VoIP using an internal, supported application that integrates with the company’s security infrastructure.

With faster, more flexible communications, the company’s IT departments around the world collaborate more effectively. Since deploying Microsoft unified communications, the IT department in the United States has been communicating with the Vienna IT staff more often using Office Communicator 2007. They exchange instant messages when they need to have a quick text conversation.

“Using Office Communicator 2007 has brought our IT departments closer, so we’re working in tandem on projects and supporting users on both sides,” says Benner. “That’s been a great business benefit.”

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Enabling Technologies products and services, call (800) 923-4310 or visit the Web site at: www.enablingtechcorp.com

For more information about Gibson Guitar Corporation products and services, call (800) 444-2766 or visit the Web site at: www.gibson.com

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 - Microsoft Office Communicator 2007
 - Microsoft Office Communicator Mobile
 - Microsoft Office Outlook 2007
 - Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007

Technologies

- Active Directory
- Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access
- Microsoft Office Communicator Web Access

Hardware

- AudioCodes Mediant 1000 Quad Gateway
- Microsoft RoundTable
- Nortel BCM400 PBX
- Polycom CX700 IP phones

Partners

- Enabling Technologies