University Accelerates Deployment of Cisco Unified Communications to Continue Operations during COVID-19

Founded in 1871, West Chester University (WCU) is the flagship university of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The university has experienced unprecedented growth over the last several years, currently serving more than 17,000 students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. WCU offers more than 180 undergraduate and graduate degrees, including four doctoral programs. Courses are delivered in a variety of settings including in-class, online, and through a hybrid delivery model.

For many years, West Chester University's voice infrastructure was an older model Nortel/Avaya Meridian CS1000E PBX which delivered analog, digital and voice service to the university's roughly 1,800 phone handsets distributed throughout 70 buildings across three sites. Unfortunately it did not offer the array of features or flexibility in delivering the services required by a modern university structure, therefore, with an end-of-support date approaching, WCU decided to review their voice network needs.

> "Within minutes of administrative units transitioning to a fully remote working environment on Friday, March 13, our telecommunications team had Cisco Jabber and Cisco Finesse fully implemented and ready for use by undergraduate admissions customer service agents. In the midst of transitioning our whole team, during one of the busiest times within an admissions cycle, Cisco Jabber and Cisco Finesse allowed us to continually serve all callers without any interruption of service. This continuity of service has continued and Jabber and Finesse have allowed our Customer Service Agents to remain remote even with the department reopening to welcome visitors."
>
> — Sarah L. Freed, Assistant Vice President of Admissions, WCU

CHALLENGE

WCU's Converged Communications Team was concerned about the risk of system failure knowing that their current voice infrastrucutre was nearing end-of-support and started the search to identify a replacement system that provided a fully supported and upgradable solution, satisfied business needs, and offered increased features and functionality.

SOLUTION

The search for a replacement telephone system presented an opportunity for WCU to integrate its voice system with integrated voice, video, and collaboration communications. WCU searched for a solution that would provide mobile campus communication connectivity, integrated voice and video, and enhanced call center technologies for student services offices. They ultimately partnered with Red River to implement Cisco Unified Communications which provided, among other features:

- A call management solution that includes options for redundancy in the event of hardware and/or voice gateway failure, ensuring continuity of service.

- Desk handsets supporting Gigabit (1000Mbps) pass-through ethernet connections for desktop computer network support.

- The ability to integrate with Microsoft Outlook and deliver a "click-to-call" feature.

- The ability to pair a mobile device to a user's extension.

- E911 integration, adhering to all current PA 911 emergency communication requirements since WCU Public Safety operates as a PSAP for the campus. E911 Integration included the implementation of Informacast desktop notifications which, when paired with a custom script created by the University, relays the user's location to Public Safety Dispatch when E911 calls are dialed from a campus telephone set.

- Mobility features such as Cisco Jabber softphone app

- Cisco IM & Presence which allows users to see the availability of their colleagues and exchange instant messages with them.

- Cisco Unified Contact Center Express.

The biggest implementation challenge was standing up the new Cisco solution while the Avaya/Nortel continued to handle the university's voice traffic. A proof of xoncept was conducted to test the integration and lines were systematically removed from the PBX over to the new Cisco Unified Communications platform.

RESULTS

To eliminate dependency on the Avaya/Nortel PBX, the University's Converged Communications Team launched the system conversion with an ambitious deployment schedule in December 2019. Then in March 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deployment was further accelerated out of necessity to accommodate remote work. The Cisco Jabber softphone app was the perfect solution to minimize business interruption and quickly became a critical component of the University's Continuity of Operations Plan.

In addition to the mobility benefits offered to end users just in time for remote work situations, the reduced operational costs associated with the new Cisco Unified Communications platform has allowed West Chester University to pass on savings to the University's end users by reducing internal telecom chargeback rates.

Despite the challenges of remote work, West Chester University's Converged Communications Team in collaboration with Red River's voice architect, completed this complex project in an impressive amount of time, achieving significant milestones such as:

- The deployment of 1800+ Cisco telephone sets by June 2020

- The conversion of five student services areas to Cisco Finesse Contact Center by July 2020

- The onboarding of a remote campus to the Cisco Unified Communications platform in September 2020

- The migration to Cisco Unity Connection voicemail in November 2020 and,

- The final cutover to remove all remaining dependencies on the Avaya/Nortel PBX in December 2020

Another outstanding accomplishment leveraging the new functionality of Cisco and Informacast as well as a custom script developed by West Chester University added a Panic Button to each telephone set. When the button is pressed, WCU's Public Safety dispatch receives immediate notification including the caller's name and location. This, of course, is a very welcome security feature which eliminates the need for additional panic button devices making it both efficient and cost-effective.

Partnering with Red River on the conversion to Cisco Unified Communications has realized both immediate and continued benefits and positioned West Chester University to fully embrace the future of unified communications technology.

"Cisco Jabber and Finesse have allowed our department to continue serving our students in an efficient and organized way while working remotely. We are able to have our calls routed to the appropriate team member, making it easier for students to get the information they need as quickly as possible. We are grateful to be able to take and make calls from wherever we are working to maintain operations and to provide outstanding customer service."

— Dr. Dawn Renta, Director of The Graduate School Operations, WCU

ABOUT WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY

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