Sustainable Design Firm
Gains Efficiencies with IP Technology

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

In order to survive in the challenging, highly-charged arena that defines today’s business environment, most organizations—large and small—have embraced the notion that utilizing technologies which increase productivity, improve efficiency and control costs are solid ingredients for growth over the next several years. Across the country, companies are investing in a variety of new innovations that can lead to improved business performance without disrupting the organization or compromising customer service.

For many companies, deploying efficient IP-based communications have proven to be a tremendous asset for achieving these fundamental business objectives. The flexibility and efficiency afforded through IP solutions have been proven to increase performance across a number of metrics, including increased productivity, shorter sales cycles, reduced infrastructure costs, enhanced customer service, and overall efficiency gains—all in a seamless and cost-effective manner.

For SERA Architects, a highly successful and rapidly growing architectural and design firm headquartered in Portland, Oregon, the appeal of IP communications to help the organization manage its expanding operations was considered a preferred solution to replace the legacy system that had outgrown both its usefulness and relevance.

Well respected in the Pacific Northwest for its unique ability to transform ideas into designs that convey substance, beauty, relevance, and function, SERA is a dynamic firm that is sought by both public and private enterprise to design a wide range of buildings and complexes that include government buildings, university facilities, hotels, corporate headquarters, health care facilities and combined residential and commercial developments across the Western United States. Founded in 1968, the firm currently employs some 115 staff members.

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Joe Pinzone
Chief Operating Officer for SERA

INDUSTRY: Professional Services
LOCATION: Portland, Oregon

INTEGRA SOLUTION
PRI and IP PBX
GROWTH & AN INEFFICIENT LEGACY SYSTEM

In recent years, the company's reputation and success resulted in SERA receiving many new projects. This, in turn, meant hiring more staff and acquiring additional office space in a building located directly across the street, as well as the addition of off-site project offices.

While the staff remained in relatively close proximity from a geographical standpoint, the business soon encountered significant problems when trying to connect everyone through the legacy communications system.

"The process of integrating new users and locations into the communications network was cumbersome, inefficient and problematic," recalled Ken Christman, IT Manager for SERA. "We encountered problems whenever we needed to move staff around or change phone numbers, which we did quite often. The system was outdated, and ill-suited for what we needed to do. It could take our team hours just to configure the phone system, and then it may take several more days to find and troubleshoot all the bugs. It was frustrating for the IT staff, and disruptive to the entire company. We realized that in order to maintain an efficient and customer focused operation, the company needed to bring in an entirely new communications platform."

NEXT-GENERATION ENTERPRISE TECHNOLOGY

While ease-of-deployment was certainly a top priority for SERA, the company wanted to take advantage of additional capabilities that were available through next-generation enterprise communications technology.

"Our management recognized that the added functionalities of IP technology would bring a number of productivity tools to our business, and enable our team to work more efficiently," said Christman.

As Christman explained, embedded applications like unified messaging, presence management, and integrated conferencing, would improve SERA's efficiency across the enterprise, and would also minimize the need to bring in expensive third-party solutions.

"While we desperately wanted a highly functional system, we also wanted one that would be intuitive, simple to manage and could easily scale to support the business. We are a thriving organization with complex needs. Finding the right communications solution was critical for managing our growth."

Determined to find a new communications platform that would support SERA's comprehensive needs, the company met with many of the largest communications equipment providers in the country. Among these vendors was Integra Telecom, a respected and successful provider of communications solutions to businesses throughout the United States.

According to Director of Product Management Rogier Ducloo, the challenges facing SERA were similar to other organizations that had outgrown their existing infrastructure.

"Many companies are finding that legacy TDM technology is ill-suited for delivering
the types of robust applications that today’s businesses demand,” said Ducloo. “For example, tools like unified communications, web conferencing and presence management are all optimized in an IP infrastructure. Organizations just like SERA have recognized the profound benefits associated with IP technology, and have made the decision to invest in these solutions as quickly as possible.”

After evaluating a number of solutions, SERA opted for Integra’s offering built around Mitel communications technology.

“Our decision to go with Integra and Mitel was predicated on a number of key factors,” said Joe Pinzone, chief operating officer for SERA. “The company offered a very impressive solutions portfolio that included a number of compelling applications that we felt would translate into significant productivity gains. In addition, we found the solution to be cost-competitive with competing solutions. We were also very comfortable with the level of support and service we would receive from Integra. It is a company that has an outstanding reputation in our market, and we knew we would be well looked after.”

“In addition,” Pinzone continued, “we wanted to work with providers that shared SERA’s commitment to sustainability and environmental preservation. SERA has earned a substantial reputation for designs that preserve both the natural environment and incorporate the local feel of the area. We take great care to ensure that we minimize our impact on the environment, and we use this philosophy to help guide us in finding the right suppliers. As a firm that prides itself in sustainability, it’s imperative that we work with other companies that share this philosophy. It was apparent in our many conversations that both Integra and Mitel shared this same belief.”

RESULTS

To help address SERA’s immediate needs and provide scalability and flexibility to handle the company’s growth, Integra created a communications solution built around the Mitel 3300 Integrated Communications Platform (ICP), a robust IP communications solution platform that can easily scale to serve tens of thousands of users. The 3300 system allows business to centrally manage a powerful IP communications solution that incorporates a wide array of features and compelling applications. The 3300 supports legacy technology—including TDM- and analog-based services—which allow customers to extend the lifecycle of their existing infrastructures.

“The 3300 solution has a well-earned reputation for providing reliability, flexibility and a high degree of functionality to businesses with very sophisticated needs,” said Ducloo. “And that’s just part of it. From an administration perspective, the 3300 makes it incredibly easy for businesses to conduct moves, adds and changes. For SERA’s purposes, this was a very important selling point. It gives businesses the flexibility to move people into or out of the network without any disruption to the business or loss of functionality.”

SEAMLESS INTEGRATION & EFFICIENCY BOOST

Another key feature is the ability of the 3300 to seamlessly integrate with SERA’s Microsoft® Exchange server. While other communications platforms usually connect to Exchange only through expensive middleware, or some other costly third-party solution, the intuitive nature of the 3300 and Exchange allows customers like SERA to
integrate communications with desktop applications. As a result, SERA employees can access voicemail from any location on their data network.

“The unified messaging capability of the system has been a great efficiency boost for our company,” said Christman. “The staff now receives their voicemail integrated with their email, so it provides a single destination to retrieve all their incoming messages.”

With the Mitel 3300 providing the backbone call control, SERA added a number of Mitel applications to deliver the robust functionality that the business craved. For example, Mitel Audio and Web Conferencing (AWC) gives users the ability to initiate or participate in conferencing on-the-fly. As an application that’s embedded into the Mitel communications system, SERA found this to be a very cost-effective alternative to the pricey subscription-based conferencing solutions it previously relied upon. And since AWC allows SERA team members to conduct or join a call from any desktop or device in the system, it negates the need for dedicated videoconferencing equipment.

“The conferencing solution has been a real boon to our organization,” said Pinzone. “We find that conference calls are handled much more efficiently when we don’t have to chase people down to bring them to a conference room.”

In addition, Pinzone said that the quality of AWC far surpassed the call quality available through the previous system.

“The previous system we had also included an embedded conferencing feature, but frankly, we found that the poor quality made it unusable. In contrast, the Mitel AWC functionality is used everyday by our staff. We’ve never heard a single complaint about the functionality or the call quality.”

INCREASED FLEXIBILITY

Along with improving communications for office-based personnel, SERA also needed a solution that allows field-based staff to receive and maintain seamless communication with the home office. Mitel Dynamic Extension is a multi-mode solution that delivers the Mitel 3300 ICP functionality to mobile devices, enabling remote employees to keep their business profile when making outbound calls and delivering premise-based applications to the mobile device.

“Companies like SERA—which rely heavily on field-based personnel—really find value in the Mitel Dynamic Extension solution,” noted Ducloo. “It allows mobile staff to deliver a unified and professional appearance to customers and suppliers, and the integrated applications substantially improve efficiency as well.”

CONCLUSION

With its new Mitel IP communications system well in place, SERA Architects has noticed a number of productivity and efficiency gains across the organization.

“The process of adding or moving staff around is much cleaner and easier,” said Pinzone. “The intuitive nature of the Mitel 3300 allows us to make whatever adjustments are needed without causing any disruption to the business. In addition, the new features, including unified messaging and the mobility tools, have been very well received by our staff. With our previous system, only two percent of the features were ever used. The usage rates on the new system have increased tangentially, which reinforces the value that the system provides.”

“Above all, the relationship with SERA and Integra has been nothing short of exemplary,” concluded Pinzone.