Northwestern College

Northwestern College (www.nwc.edu) offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs to more than 3,000 students. Located in St. Paul, MN, Northwestern is among the top Christian colleges in the Midwest.

Challenges

The higher education sector as a whole has experienced limited budgets, requiring colleges and universities across the country to find new and more cost-effective ways to operate.

Northwestern College responded by creating a long-term strategic plan, with priority goals for the next five years. Among the school's priorities was to explore new ways of cultivating academic excellence and institutional advancement by using resources more effectively. "The entire campus community is charged with helping the school achieve these goals," says Sarah Grudzinski, Network and Telecom Team Lead, Northwestern College.

When Northwestern's voice communications solution reached end of life, and new building construction on campus required expansion, Grudzinski recognized an opportunity for the IT department to help support the school's strategic initiative. "A new solution for the whole campus was not a part of our initial plans because we had very limited budget," she says. "But since we were still spending money and time to support and maintain the old system and infrastructure, we needed to evaluate our options."

The college created a committee to review business requirements and identify a solution that would be the best option from both an operational and educational perspective. "We have a small IT staff, so we wanted a solution that would help simplify system management," adds the IT manager. "Since we augment our small staff with student workers, the committee also wanted a solution that would equip them with practical skills that will help them in the technology industry once they graduate."

Grudzinski already had a solution in mind. "We'd already decided on the school's network infrastructure," she says. "We figured we'd go with a communications solution from the same vendor to take advantage of bundled pricing."

Industry:
Higher Education

Challenges:
- Campus expansion
- Budget restraints
- Small IT department
- Multiple, remote radio stations
- Aging communications infrastructure

Solution:
- Unified Communications & Collaboration (UC&C) architecture: NEC UNIVERGE 3C™
- Virtualized Private Cloud Infrastructure
- NEC Software Assurance
- Contact Center: NEC UC for Business (UCB)
- NEC Dealer: Loffler Companies, Inc. (Bloomington, MN)

Results:
- Strategic business alignment
- Virtualized network infrastructure
- Cloud-based communications
- Cost-effective business continuity
- Simplified system management
- Rich end-user experience

Challenges (cont.)

The committee also wanted a solution to help address some of the school's other business needs. "We knew we wanted an IT-centric architecture so we could move away from the traditional migration cycle," adds Grudzinski. "This would enable the college to keep pace with industry changes."

Northwestern also owns and operates 14 radio stations at seven locations throughout the upper Midwest. This includes the on-campus Christian radio station that serves listeners across the Twin Cities area. The committee wanted to connect the radio stations to the campus system, yet also allow them to run separately in the event of a WAN outage.

"Our radio stations depend on on-air fundraising drives for all their funding," adds Grudzinski. "So we didn't want something that was just survivable or would just failover, we wanted something that was fully redundant." The school also wanted a solution with contact-center functionality to help improve the stations' fundraising efforts.

Solution

Northwestern worked with Loffler Companies, an NEC dealer in Bloomington, MN, to find an IT-centric, unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) architecture. Loffler recommended NEC UNIVERGE 3C, a comprehensive, unified communications and collaboration solution that provides powerful voice, data and video capabilities all in a single user experience that can be leveraged across numerous devices. UNIVERGE 3C's distributed architecture makes it ideal for virtualized and cloud-based environments.

"UNIVERGE 3C is the IT-centric platform that Northwestern wanted, and the standards-based architecture offers a number of cost savings," said Randy Olson, Manager of Integrated Solutions Engineering, Loffler Companies. "In addition, UNIVERGE 3C is highly secure and can be deployed across a wide range of PCs, smart phones and tablets, which helps accommodate the new generation of faculty and staff."

UNIVERGE 3C was not the only solution Grudzinski considered, but it quickly climbed to the top of her list. "We compared pricing for UNIVERGE 3C to that of the competitor solution quoted in the bundle with our network infrastructure," says Grudzinski. "The price in the bundled solution was simply too compelling."

Loffler teamed with the NEC sales team to take a second look at the numbers. "We were completely aware of Northwestern's need to contain costs," says Olson. "But since the UNIVERGE 3C solution aligned so well with Northwestern's immediate and future needs, we owed it to the school to at least take a closer look, just to make sure we were comparing apples to apples."

Olson conducted a cost analysis of running the UNIVERGE 3C solution on Northwestern's new network infrastructure. Grudzinski made an interesting discovery after contacting a few other vendors for competitive pricing quotes on the network infrastructure as a standalone.

"Pricing for the network infrastructure was 30–40 percent lower as a standalone than it was in our quote for the bundle," says the IT manager.

This explained the pricing disparity between UNIVERGE 3C and the competitor solution. "Basically, the vendor deeply discounted the communication system in the bundled package so that it would look significantly cheaper when compared to other solutions," Grudzinski adds. "But they then inflated the cost of the network infrastructure to make up the difference."

Grudzinski decided to go with UNIVERGE 3C. "By unbundling the communications system and the network infrastructure in the competitor's solution, the NEC team was able to illustrate that UNIVERGE 3C was not only less expensive, it was price competitive without requiring heavy discounts," she adds.

Northwestern first implemented the solution in a newly constructed building on campus as a pilot, then across the entire campus. "This happened within a month and a half over the summer," says Grudzinski.

The college then installed UNIVERGE 3C in all the radio stations and is using the solution's active-active redundancy and load-balancing capabilities for cost-effective business continuity.

"There is no additional cost to add more instances of the UNIVERGE 3C software," says Grudzinski. UNIVERGE 3C also provides survivability via SIP gateways, alleviating possible router failure and offering a more cost-effective price point. "So now radio stations run together with the campus system, but have full redundancy in the event they need to run separately," she adds.

As a standards-based platform, UNIVERGE 3C supports SIP, VoIP and legacy telecom, which provides Northwestern additional cost savings. "We were able to reuse more than 400 of our existing SIP and IP phones," says Grudzinski. Since the solution combines multiple communications applications that were once separate, the school was also able to use its existing Microsoft® Exchange® application for both voicemail and unified messaging. This not only lowers initial costs, it also simplifies system management and upgrades for the school's IT team, which further lowers the school's overall total cost of ownership over time.

Northwestern is also using NEC's UC for Business Contact Center application to improve customer service. UCB Contact Center is being used within the radio stations to improve fundraising efforts. The solution is also being used on campus within various departments that have heavy call volume.

"We're currently using UCB in our event ticket sales office, technology/helpdesk office and the admissions department," adds Grudzinski. "UCB's robust reporting function is especially useful for forecasting and staffing for times when each office has a spike in call volumes." NWC's receptionists are also using the UCB Desktop application to provide a more personalized service to callers.

Results

NWC is using UNIVERGE 3C to enable a virtualized, private cloud UC&C infrastructure. "Prior to UNIVERGE 3C, our phone system required a giant room with walls covered in phone connectors," says Grudzinski. "After the deployment, our only hardware is a small, half rack of equipment, and the rest is in our virtual server environment, which is quite amazing to us."

The college now delivers unified communications and collaboration services from the cloud, enabling end users to interact anytime, from virtually any device including a PC, smartphone or tablet. 3C's web-based client provides a rich, consistent experience across devices, making it easier for users to be more efficient, responsive and accessible.

UNIVERGE 3C supports the college's long-term strategic goals. "The solution has simplified management and helped to make our small staff more efficient," adds Grudzinski. "The solution is also enabling our student workers to explore new and innovative ways we can further add value to the system while getting practical experience for future employment."

Grudzinski is happy with the solution. "UNIVERGE 3C better aligns with our immediate and long-term strategy, especially in comparison to the solution we initially had in mind," she says.

The IT manager is also happy with her relationship with Loffler and NEC. "Loffler and NEC stepped up and said we really want to work with the college. They took the time to really understand our diverse business needs and explored creative ways to work within our budget," she concludes.

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