



Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Consumer goods manufacturing

Customer Profile

Lifetime Products is the world's largest manufacturer of residential basketball equipment and polyethylene tables. Headquartered in Clearfield, Utah, the privately held company employs 2,300 people.

Business Situation

To better support mobile employees and improve communication, Lifetime deployed a unified messaging solution that eliminated its traditional voice-mail system and expanded mobile access.

Solution

Using features in Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007, engineers built a voice over IP gateway to replace the existing voice-mail system and created a replication strategy that streamlined access to messaging.

Benefits

- Increases productivity
- Reduces costs
- Boosts customer service
- Enhances availability and security
- Creates infrastructure to support goals

Lifetime Products Boosts Productivity and Cuts Costs with Unified Messaging Solution

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John Bowden, Chief Information Officer, Lifetime Products

Lifetime Products manufactures tables, chairs, and basketball equipment for customers in more than 50 countries. Its employees in the United States and China depend on messaging technologies to stay connected to customers and the office. To improve productivity, Lifetime deployed Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging. Employees can access their e-mail, voice-mail, and fax messages in their inboxes—while at work, at home, or on the road. As a result, each employee using unified messaging has realized five hours per week in productivity gains, and the company has saved U.S.\$180,000 by replacing 300 desktop phones. Customer service, system availability, and security also have been enhanced. Lifetime now has a unified communications environment that focuses on the flexibility of wireless devices over desktop phones.

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Lifetime Products

Situation

Lifetime Products manufactures residential basketball equipment, folding tables and chairs, and outdoor sheds and utility tables. The company was founded in 1973 as a garage-based sports equipment business and now has customers all over the world. Approximately 1,700 employees work at the company’s headquarters in Clearfield, Utah, and 600 employees are at facilities in Xiamen, China. Lifetime customers include numerous Fortune 500 companies in more than 50 countries.

The company’s infrastructure includes 1,200 HP workstations running the Windows® XP Professional operating system or using Terminal Services in the Windows Server® 2003 Enterprise Edition operating system. In addition, 300 employees use wireless devices that run Windows Mobile® software. The combined technologies provide business-critical messaging and wireless access as well as Information Rights Management capabilities that protect sensitive data.

Lifetime deployed Microsoft® Exchange Server 2003 Enterprise Edition in June 2003 and implemented Exchange Server 2003 Service Pack 2 (SP2) in October 2005 to incorporate mobile access features as an initial step in moving to a unified messaging environment. The company found that its executives, sales professionals, and other employees who use wireless devices gained an hour a day in productivity. In addition, Lifetime saved money in annual phone costs and in portable computer maintenance.

“We want to use the latest messaging technologies because they are critical to our productivity and bottom line,” explains John Bowden, Chief Information Officer at Lifetime Products. “Our ability to access e-mail from remote locations has saved our company tens of thousands of dollars.”

While pleased with Exchange Server 2003 SP2, the company was eager to move to the next generation of technologies. Lifetime wanted to further improve employee productivity by delivering e-mail, voice-mail, and fax messages to users’ inboxes. The company also sought to reduce costs and simplify IT management by replacing its existing voice-mail system and many of its desktop phones. The voice-mail maintenance contract was U.S.\$43,000 per year. And the proprietary phones cost about \$600 annually for each user. In addition, because the voice-mail and Private Branch Exchange (PBX) systems were separate from the e-mail system, adding new users meant duplicated efforts in setting up new accounts.

Another issue for Lifetime was that its China operations were not on an Exchange Server environment and employees there used a POP3 e-mail service. The company did not want to establish a backup infrastructure thousands of miles away that would duplicate management tools and IT personnel.

Solution

In November 2006, Lifetime enrolled in the Microsoft Rapid Deployment Program for Microsoft Exchange Server 2007. In early 2007, the company added unified messaging functionality.

Implementing a New Server Infrastructure

The first step was to perform a health check on every system in the Lifetime infrastructure, including 50 HP NetServer and ProLiant server computers. The company used the Microsoft Exchange Server Best Practices Analyzer with help from Microsoft Services. The analysis included 12 recommendations for improving the security and performance of the IT environment.

Once the health check was completed, engineers configured three new servers, each

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running Windows Server 2003 Enterprise x64 Edition and Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Enterprise Edition:

- One server, located in the United States, supports client access and hub transport functionality. “We configured one server to support both of these roles because we were anticipating the load to be quite demanding,” explains Jared Sahleen, Senior Technology Manager at Lifetime Products. The front-end mail servers receive about 1.1 million e-mail messages per month. Lifetime is also using Microsoft Exchange Hosted Filtering in a pilot program as a possible alternative to third-party services that scan messages for viruses, spam, and policy compliance.
- One server, also in the United States, stores about 1,000 mailboxes and provides unified messaging services.
- A third server is located in China and provides mailbox, client access, and hub transport functionality.

Building a Voice Communications Gateway

To implement unified messaging, engineers converted circuit-switched data coming into the company’s existing Siemens Hipath 300H PBX into Internet Protocol (IP) voice data. Lifetime built a voice over IP gateway with help from Enabling Technologies, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner with extensive experience in messaging and speech-enabled applications. “Integrating our PBX system with Exchange Server and transferring voice mail over to the new environment only took us one and a half days,” Sahleen says. “We were pleasantly surprised at how easy the process was.” Lifetime also merged the voice mail from its wireless carrier with Exchange Server, so that messages left on an employee’s cell phone would automatically appear in the user’s e-mail inbox.

Establishing a Replication Strategy

Engineers employed the local continuous replication (LCR) feature in Exchange Server 2007 to provide failover protection and a remote backup strategy. LCR creates a complete replica of each Exchange Server database, storing replica files on a separate disk residing on the same server. At any time, engineers can make a replica database active. Because access to messaging data is critical, engineers configured the Distributed File System (DFS) technologies in Windows Server 2003 to back up replica databases every day to a separate server in the United States.

Rolling Out Exchange Server 2007

Lifetime decided to combine its rollout of Exchange Server 2007 with the deployment of Microsoft Office Professional 2007. “We combined those two large projects because there are a lot of things in Office Professional 2007 that bring out the benefits of Exchange Server 2007,” Bowden explains. By February 2007, Exchange Server 2007 had been deployed to 75 percent of Lifetime employees, including the 300 employees in China who use desktop systems. All Lifetime e-mail users are now on Exchange Server 2007, taking advantage of the unified voice-mail, e-mail, and fax messaging.

In addition, Lifetime has begun upgrading its mobile devices to Windows Mobile 6, and it has deployed Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007 so that mobile users can access files and applications that reside on corporate servers.

Benefits

With employees accessing voice mail, e-mail, and faxes through their inboxes, Lifetime benefits from significant gains in productivity and a substantial reduction in costs. In addition, Lifetime has been able to ensure system availability as well as enhance security. Finally, it has created an

infrastructure that will help it meet the company's long-term mobile computing goals.

Increases Productivity

Exchange Server Unified Messaging has dramatically improved the efficiency and productivity of Lifetime employees, including administrators, mid-level managers, and the highly mobile sales force.

The biggest motivation for deploying Exchange Server 2007 from a technology perspective was that it can centrally manage e-mail, voice-mail, and fax messages. "This is especially significant to us because we have had to support disparate PBX and e-mail systems that couldn't talk to each other," says Sahleen. "Adding a new user meant a lot of duplicated effort. Not only did we have to set up a new mailbox in Exchange Server, but then we had to create a new account for the employee in the PBX system. With Exchange Server 2007, we only need to set up one mailbox."

Exchange Server Unified Messaging is transforming the culture of the Lifetime workplace as employees use it to expedite workday tasks, Bowden says. He recently calculated that each Lifetime employee using unified messaging has realized five hours per week in productivity gains.

"For example, my own personal work style has changed quite a bit," he explains. Before leaving for work in the morning, he accesses voice mail and e-mail from his home computer using Microsoft Office Outlook® Web Access. "Then, when I'm driving to work, that's where Outlook Voice Access comes into play. With my Bluetooth and my Windows Mobile powered smartphone beside me in the car, I talk through replies, listen to my calendar, and adjust my schedule, all without writing anything down. It's all via voice. Then at work, I sit down at my desk and deal with

whatever is left. That has literally given me personally an hour of productive time a day."

Tressa Goff, Accounts Receivable Credit Manager at Lifetime, says Exchange Server Unified Messaging was easy to learn to use. "I love being able to see my voice mail with my e-mail. Before, it wasn't unusual for me to have messages on both my desk phone and my mobile, and now with Exchange Server Unified Messaging I can pick up messages from my mobile while I move from meeting to meeting. Being able to see what is going on at my desk without me being there is simply amazing."

With the new solution, Lifetime employees in China can now contact colleagues in the United States using Exchange Server and the Microsoft Office Outlook 2007 messaging and collaboration client instead of a POP3 e-mail service and Outlook Web Access. "They are able to communicate with the rest of the company very easily and seamlessly without having both internal and external e-mail systems," says Bowden.

Reduces Costs

After deploying Exchange Server 2007, Lifetime realized an immediate reduction in costs. As more employees incorporate Exchange Server Unified Messaging features into their workday, the company expects costs to continue to decrease.

Lifetime saved \$43,000 when it was able to drop its voice-mail maintenance contract. Instead of having a separate voice-mail system with a separate directory, Lifetime now centrally manages voice-mail and e-mail users with the Active Directory® service.

Within an eight-month period, Lifetime eliminated 300 desktop phones, for a savings of \$180,000. Bowden says that while eliminating desktop phones is not mandatory, employees can opt to do so if they already

have a wireless device and use their desk phone for less than an hour a day or are away from their office for much of the day.

“Exchange Server 2007 really catapults us into realizing our vision of how employees will communicate using unified messaging and mobile devices,” Bowden says. “Instead of using a desktop phone, our employees will use a smartphone or PDA to access all of their messages.”

The company has also begun eliminating many of its 300 desktop fax machines, each of which costs about \$2,000 per year, as more employees realize the benefit of having faxes deliver to their inboxes. For example, when an employee was moving to a new office, Bowden demonstrated the fax capabilities on her workstation to convince her she didn’t need the outdated machine. “I said, ‘Let’s try the new way,’” Bowden says. “Now she doesn’t have to deal with paper and she can create rules to have the faxes she receives put in folders. It is a much more agile system.”

Lifetime would also lower its costs if it decides to replace third-party services with Exchange Hosted Filtering for messaging security. Bowden estimates that Exchange Hosted Filtering would be one-third the cost of the other services. “Right now the costs look good,” he says. “We have high hopes for that.”

Boosts Customer Service

Exchange Server Unified Messaging benefits the company from a customer relations perspective because it helps employees respond in a timely manner, track customers and accounts from one place, and eliminate the risk of losing a paper fax.

“Our customers expect a very rapid reaction to inquiries and orders, usually within the same day,” says Bowden. “Responding immediately to all messages, whether e-mail

or voice-mail, is absolutely required. With Exchange Server Unified Messaging, voice messages are never neglected because users see messages immediately in Office Outlook, Outlook Web Access, and on their Windows Mobile smartphones. This capability will dramatically improve our business results in the coming years.”

The fax feature in Exchange Server Unified Messaging is also important for customer service. Bowden says some of the company’s smaller customers prefer to fax. Now, sales team members can give customers the extension on their desk phone and Exchange Server will deliver a fax directly to their inbox, eliminating the possibility of lost or incorrectly delivered faxes.

Exchange Server Unified Messaging also helps employees like Goff organize company information. Because she deals with collections, she must keep careful records of all correspondence. “I look at Outlook as my dashboard to life,” she says. “It tells me what is going on all the time. I look at one screen, and I can see who I’ve talked to. I can go in and write notes in a message and keep that record forever. And, even though I haven’t had to do this yet, if I ever have to turn it into legal action, nothing is lost to interpretation. I’ve got it right there.”

Increases Availability and Security

By implementing a replication strategy with Exchange Server, Lifetime avoids system downtime resulting from scheduled backups or system outages. Lifetime IT personnel can back up Exchange Server databases without affecting system availability because replica files are backed up. “The replica files are not continuously in use like the native database. By storing the system backups on a separate server in the United States, we also protect ourselves against natural disasters,” Sahleen explains.

Exchange Server 2007 also offers the company opportunities to boost security through features such as the Edge Transport server role and new spam and virus filtering through Exchange Hosted Filtering. "We are investigating the new e-mail filtering options that are available through Microsoft as a way to further standardize our environment," Bowden explains.

Creates an Infrastructure to Support Long-Term Goals

Exchange Server 2007 provides the functionality required to help Lifetime expand its mobile computing capabilities. Working with Windows Mobile 6 and Office SharePoint Server 2007, Exchange Server 2007 makes it possible for Lifetime employees to access an internal product life-cycle management tool that was previously unreachable from mobile devices because it is proprietary. This ensures that Lifetime continues to have a high level of integration between its mobile devices and workflows.

"Exchange Server 2007 enhances Lifetime productivity not just from a desktop standpoint, but also by helping us be mobile around our campus and everywhere else we go around the world, including China and Hong Kong, and throughout the United States," Bowden says. "Our ability to be a more mobile work force is something that is very important to us at Lifetime, and Exchange Server 2007 makes that possible."

For More Information

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Microsoft Server Product Portfolio

For more information about the Microsoft server product portfolio, go to: www.microsoft.com/servers/default.aspx

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