

Columbus Blue Jackets NHL Management Scores with Cisco Unified Communications

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
<p>NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE'S COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports/Entertainment
<p>BUSINESS CHALLENGE</p> <p>The management staff of a professional hockey team is also responsible for handling the day-to-day operations of its arena venue. This includes meeting the communications and networking needs of a wide variety of groups that rent the arena as a venue for their events. The IT director wanted a solution that would allow his department to meet the needs of groups renting the arena, as well as allow team staff to better communicate with fans, the corporate team, its marketing partners, and vendors. The VP of Operations wanted a solution that would help to improve customer responsiveness and increase arena revenue while controlling costs.</p>
<p>NETWORK SOLUTION</p> <p>An integrated, end-to-end Cisco solution including Cisco Unified Communications with Cisco Unity, a Cisco wireless Wi-Fi solution for mobile Internet access, Cisco Unified Contact Center Express, and Cisco Adaptive Security Appliance (ASA) for network security.</p>
<p>BUSINESS VALUE</p> <p>The Cisco solution provides the Columbus Blue Jackets staff with new ways to touch its customer and fan base. Advanced communications features enable the hockey team management to meet the data and interaction needs of practically any arena client. Cisco Unified Contact Center Express gives the organization control over the customer experience. The system provides a foundation for planned additions such as Cisco Unified Wireless, helping achieve the overall goal of ubiquitous communications throughout the arena.</p>

Business Challenge

Columbus, Ohio is the home of the National Hockey League's Columbus Blue Jackets. The professional hockey team plays in Nationwide Arena, one of the world's most beautiful and unique sports and entertainment venues. Although the Blue Jackets management organization itself is made up of a couple of hundred employees, it is also responsible for the day-to-day operations of Nationwide Arena. When the Blue Jackets are not playing before the home crowd, Nationwide Arena is the venue for a wide variety of other events including the Arena Football League, concerts, conferences, and other special events.

Jim Connolly, director of IT for the Columbus Blue Jackets, and his staff have the tall order of providing communications and networking service for the small, but complex, Blue Jackets organization, as well as for clients renting the arena as an event venue.

The arena's existing Centrex private branch exchange (PBX) phone system was accumulating expensive monthly charges. Also, it was not scalable or flexible enough to accommodate the daily challenges of running a venue that serves a variety of purposes on any given day.

"With the traditional phone system, when an event booked the arena, it was a major production to accommodate their needs," says Connolly. "We would outsource that whole task of getting the phone system coordinated and configured for the needs of specific groups."

Connolly not only wanted a flexible solution for arena venue operations, he felt it was crucial for the Blue Jackets organization to have a better way to communicate with fans, the corporate team, its marketing partners, and vendors.

"My hopes and goals for this project were that we find new ways to touch our customer base and our fan base," says Larry Hoepfner, senior vice president of business operations for Nationwide Arena. "Technology can be a great tool to use."

Network Solution

The Columbus Blue Jackets organization presents itself as several distinct, individual entities, each with its own customer-facing personality and communications needs. The Ticketing Department functions as a traditional call center and generates revenue. However, people calling the main number can have any number of needs: hockey game tickets, information on special events, even just the address of the Arena.

“We are in the entertainment business,” says the arena’s Hoepfner. “We’re busy 365 days a year with the hockey team and other events in the building. We have to keep in touch with people all over the world all times of the day and night. We looked at our communication needs and what was important to us was reliability, dependability, and future applications.”

With all of these requirements in mind, a local Cisco® representative referred Connolly to Netarx, Inc., a Cisco Gold Certified Partner. With Cisco specializations in Unified Communications, Security, Wireless LAN, Netarx possesses the wide-ranging technology skills Connolly was looking for in an integrated infrastructure provider.

Connolly was considering several Cisco solutions from different partners, as well as other alternative solutions, so it was a very competitive bidding process. In the end, Connolly found that the Cisco solution, based on the Cisco Smart Business Communications Architecture, offered more flexibility and scalability than any other vendor he looked at.

“Other solutions had attractive features and even lower price points,” says Connolly. “However, the specifically versatile nature of the Cisco platform, combined with the demonstrated scalability into new technologies, made us confident that Cisco Unified Communications and the Cisco Unified Contact Center Express product was not only the right solution for today, but for tomorrow as well.”

Connolly says Netarx won his business because they were very aggressive, competitive, and visionary with their bid, while also showing their competency from a project management and day-two support perspective.

“Also, Cisco was behind them 100 percent to support them, and that supports me,” he said. “I chose Cisco and Netarx with the highest degree of confidence.”

Kirk Horn, district manager for Netarx office in Columbus, Ohio was excited by the challenges of the project.

“This is a really unique business situation,” says Horn. “Many different groups use the arena facility, so whatever we recommended and deployed needed to support the departmental functions and employees of the Blue Jackets organization, and the range of customers who rent the arena for diverse purposes. We wanted the Blue Jackets organization to represent all of its different functions with the highest degree of professionalism, and have the ability to appear larger than they really are.”

Once Horn and the Netarx team were selected for the project, they held intensive preplanning meetings to tighten the project scope as much as possible. Facilities reviews and network infrastructure planning started; user interviews were held to determine how the dial plan would work. Given the nature of the Columbus Blue Jackets business, it was like planning for several separate companies. The box office, the Blue Jackets organization, and the events department, to name a few, all needed functionality that worked in very specific ways, yet worked smoothly with each other.”

To provide Nationwide Arena and the Columbus Blue Jackets with a next-generation unified voice and data communications system, Netarx recommended a wide array of innovative Cisco Unified Communications products. The new IP infrastructure would be a completely integrated end-to-end Cisco solution including Cisco Unified Communications. Cisco Unified Contact Center Express would allow all of the individual functions of the Blue Jackets organization to present themselves to the outside world with their own individual personality and function, yet centralize all communications so that each call could be handled efficiently and professionally. Cisco Unity® would provide unified voice messaging, a Cisco wireless Wi-Fi solution for mobile access to the Internet, and Cisco ASA (Adaptive Security Appliance) for network security. The Cisco system would provide flexibility far beyond what a traditional telephone solution would offer. The Cisco Unified Communications Solution can respond to the needs of almost any arena client – phones can be added, rooms can be segmented, and the system can be configured in just about any way that a client might need.

During implementation, intensive weekly calls were held to maintain the schedule and handle project management issues.

When the big day came to cut the phone system over from Centrex to the Cisco Unified Communications Solution, champagne was brought in and Cisco Unified IP Phones were put on everyone's desks. Netarx handled two levels of training: user training for end users to learn the basic features of the Cisco Unified IP Phones, and more intensive training for the IT employees who would handle the administrative and maintenance of the network.

Business Value

With the overall goal of ubiquitous communications throughout the arena, the infrastructure put in place will provide a foundation for additions such as a Cisco Wireless system. To get ready for key groups booking the arena in the coming months, such as the NCAA first-round and the NHL Draft, wireless communications will be added. The infrastructure will support Cisco Unified Wireless Phones 7920 and Internet access throughout the arena. As Connolly's IT staff gains experience with the platform, the system can be integrated with the ticketing platform, and even the concessions department, in order to facilitate transactional business during games and other special events. Until such additions are made, Connolly and the Blue Jackets organization are enjoying the features of Cisco Unified Communications, and are no longer spending US\$10,000 per month on line services.

Overall employee productivity is impacted most powerfully by enabling the entire staff with customer service capabilities. Callers are no longer transferred around to different departments – instead they can choose the correct department or easily reach someone who can connect them with the right group. And because each entity operates individually, but now has Unified Communications, the “silo” environment is eliminated, freeing management to dynamically alter call flows as needed.

“When we have a hockey game scheduled in our building, we know one thing for sure: at 7:00 p.m. the puck is going to drop whether we're ready for the game or not,” says Hoepfner. “Dependability and reliability of service were the key issues for us; Cisco and Netarx listened and delivered.”

“The Cisco solution deployed by the Netarx team exceeded all of our objectives,” adds Connolly. “A lot of people think that all you need from a phone is dial tone, but it is much more complex than that. This is a communications system that will be a business driver for us.”



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