Michael Page International gets the job done with new Cisco telephony and networking solution

"Hands down, for our type of business, Cisco has the best Communications and networking technology in the world. I can't say enough good things about how much Cisco and its products like CallManager, Unity, ASA Firewalls and WAN Accelerators have helped us."

– Brett Winn, Regional IT Director, Michael Page International

Michael Page International (Michael Page) is a professional recruitment consultancy that specialises in finding permanent, contract and temporary staff for some of the world's leading employers. As well as matching job seekers with vacant positions, the company also advises employers on their sourcing strategies.

Established in the UK in 1976, Michael Page has a global network of 149 offices spread across 25 countries. The company opened its first Australian office in Sydney in 1985.

In recent years, Michael Page has grown rapidly both locally and across the Asia Pacific. It now has 15 offices throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Business challenge

Michael Page's business was expanding exponentially in Australia, opening up new offices and employing more consultants to meet the growing demand for their recruitment services.

In 2004, however, the company was experiencing ongoing problems with its telephone and IT systems. The company had a diverse range of PABX vendors and models in its offices, which required specific skills to manage and were costly to maintain. Performance was lagging in the recruitment firm's satellite offices, mainly because it still operated a distributed IP environment.

"We had phone systems that were inefficient and unstable, as well as difficult and costly to manage remotely," says Brett Winn, Regional IT Director, Michael Page International. "The way the reception consoles were set up, consultants were fixed to their office desk.

The disparate nature of the local area network (LAN) created further headaches due to a mix of switching infrastructure across the various offices and an under-performing wide area network.

"We had previously moved to a Citrix-style centralised service environment. This enabled consultants to log into a desktop from any office, however, the quality of this service over the network was less than satisfactory.

It had become increasingly clear that Michael Page needed to upgrade its telephony and IT infrastructure – or risk losing further business. "We needed to address the fundamental issues surrounding our IT environment. It wasn't performing as our business expected and our expanding force of consultants needed to be mobile while remaining connected with both clients and candidates," says Winn.

Solution

Michael Page's brief was clear: "Whatever you do, make sure the solution is rock-solid."

Initially, a Cisco WAN Accelerator was installed to boost network speed between Michael Page's two data centres in Sydney and Hong Kong. "We were looking for users in our Asian offices to access data more quickly from Sydney," says Winn.

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However, the focus was on fixing the phone system – which was turning into lost revenue, as well as finding a way to handle greater call volumes and provide more call options.

"Customers and candidates contacting us were not getting through to our consultants when needed, rather, were being sent through to voicemail," Winn explains. "This not only created a poor impression of Michael Page, but also was impacting on the business."

Cisco CallManager 4.2 Cluster packaged with Cisco Unity Connections was the clear choice. "With the new CallManager and Unity, we could change the way calls were routed so they only went to voicemail after hours. This meant recruiters were more contactable and able to provide a more personal touch," says Winn.

Michael Page took this opportunity to upgrade its servers, integrated services routers, and switches, along with boosting the company's firewall security and consolidating eight firewalls, with two Cisco ASAs in each of its data centres. Cisco SmartNet was also employed to provide support and maintenance for its new infrastructure.

"At Michael Page, we place great value in embracing a whole solution, rather than pinpoint ones," says Winn. "If we like a product and it works for us, it makes sense that we'll have greater success if we explore what a suite of products can achieve. We have done this with Cisco."

Results

Improved IP telephony

Since the new Cisco phone system was deployed, Michael Page has gone from having its phones go down daily either across the network or at particular offices, to a stable environment without any major outages.

"Our consultants practically spend their entire day on the telephone, they live and die by it," says Winn. "If your phones fall over, you can account for every hour they are down, in terms of lost revenue." On top of that, Michael Page saves on the cost of calls made between offices over its IP network.

The Cisco telephone system also provides vital new functionality. For example, with extension mobility, consultants are now far more efficient and productive as they are still contactable while away from their desk.

"Consultants can pick up the phone from one desk and move to another or a meeting room, if, for instance, they want more privacy," says Winn. "Or stay in touch even if they're not in the office.

"If consultants are visiting a client or candidate, they don't lose their day because they're not able to access their voicemail or receive calls if they're sitting in a different office."

Enhanced networking capabilities

Michael Page can run its business with confidence, comfortable in the knowledge it has a reliable, highly capable network.

The common LAN environment has made it much easier for consultants to move about but stay in touch by being able to 'hot desk'.

"It doesn't matter if a consultant based in Sydney worked from Melbourne or Hong Kong for that matter – they can still log in as if they are at their own desk and see what their team may be up to."

With Cisco's WAN technology on board, our systems work faster, particularly for its offices across Asia, which is important if consultants are trying to access key information about clients or candidates.

"The real benefit lies in having a total Cisco solution that can grow as we do. We expect the Cisco platform will keep us in good shape for a long time to come."

– Brett Winn, Regional IT Director, Michael Page International

"In recruitment, the database is a core tool," says Winn. "You need quick return times for consultants to not only do their job more efficiently but also have faith in the system they're using. We can't afford, for example, to have consultants keep manual records of candidates or clients because the system is slow."

The Cisco ASA Firewalls have delivered the high level of security needed for the eight websites it runs across Asia Pacific.

"Our websites provide our main source of candidates, with about 90 percent coming to us through them," says Winn. "Security is paramount because it's essential to protect resumes and timesheets sent to us or to prevent people defacing web pages or stealing information. The websites are our most critical service next to the telephone."

Reduced management costs

Previously, Michael Page had eight individual server environments located in each of the countries in its Asia Pacific network, but only had IT staff in Sydney and Hong Kong.

"It was a crazy way to maintain systems that were a thousand miles away and you couldn't physically lay hands on when things went awry," says Winn.

By centralising the infrastructure in the Sydney and Hong Kong data centres, Michael Page's IT team had first-hand access to equipment.

"It's far more efficient now the network and telephone systems are centrally located and we aren't forced to make changes on eight separate systems. We make changes on one and distribute them to the second, as required. Naturally, management costs have dropped substantially."

Roadmap for the future

Michael Page is also evaluating some of the "deeper functionality" within Cisco CallManager that may further improve the way its consultants do business on the phone.

"Click to dial is a concept that interests us," says Winn. "It lets our guys dial numbers more quickly by simply clicking them on a screen. So too does Cisco's SoftPhone solution, enabling remote or travelling staff to remain connected from a software phone on their laptop, which leverages the CallManager and fixed-line rates.

"These are just a couple of tools we see ourselves using. The real future benefit lies in having a total Cisco solution that can grow as we do. We expect the Cisco platform will keep us in good shape for a long time to come."