



ALTRAN

ALTRAN BELGIUM OPENS NEW DOORS FOR COMMUNICATION WITH IP TELEPHONY

«THE SIMPLIFICATION OF TELEPHONY MANAGEMENT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT MOTIVATION BEHIND OUR DECISION TO SWITCH TO IP TELEPHONY. THE COST SAVINGS ON INTERNAL COMMUNICATION ARE AN ADDED BONUS.»

Gauthier Robe, IT Manager at Altran Belgium

Two years ago, Altran Belgium's lease contract for their PABX telephone exchange came to an end. The exchange in question had become outdated and was in urgent need of replacement. There were times it would show all lines as being engaged even though in reality they were not. The company suspects this had to do with the temperature in the room where the exchange was stored. Because this space was relatively limited, the former exchange would often overheat, which hindered its optimum operation. Whenever the exchange was not working properly, the company had to call on the assistance of a technician from the operator. Altran Belgium therefore sought an alternative in order to put an end to this inconvenient way of working. Above all, Altran's IT department was looking for a way to standardise the communications infrastructure and reduce reliance on external specialists.

Upon the expiry of the lease contract for the existing analogue telephone exchange, Altran's IT department proposed the switch to IP telephony. That would allow Altran to centralise data and telephony and keep just one contact person for both communication services. "I'd rather keep my address list as short as possible," says Gauthier Robe, IT Manager at Altran Belgium. «By opting for IP telephony, we only need one external point of contact for both our telephone and computer network.»

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Altran Belgium is the Belgian branch of the Altran Group. The organisation, founded in 1996, specialises in consultancy in the field of electronics and micro-electronics, ICT, telecommunications, quality, management and organisation, strategy, automation and business processes. With nine branches and over 650 consultants, Altran positions itself in Belgium as a global partner in innovation. Thanks to its broad approach and diverse perspectives, Altran offers its clients the guarantee of efficient technological innovation coupled with significant added value. In Belgium and Luxembourg, as with everywhere else in the world, well-planned personnel management plays a key role in Altran's evolution towards being a solid consultancy partner. The organisation attracts consultants from the best universities and can therefore offer a unique combination of knowledge and talent to predominantly large organisations.

CHALLENGE

When Altran Belgium's contract expired for its analogue telephone exchange, the company decided to switch to a new technology that could be converged with its computer network. The simplified management of a converged network for voice and data would allow the organisation to make its own adjustments and thus keep maintenance costs in check. In addition, Altran Belgium was looking to offer its consultants a wireless internet connection at the office.

SOLUTION

Altran Belgium's directors gave the company's IT department the green light in 2006 to carry out the transition to IP telephony. The department made the deliberate choice for a 100% Cisco solution. Alongside IT, the IT department now manages the telephony side of the new infrastructure. Altran Belgium called upon the services of IT partner Megabyte for the installation of the new converged network for voice and data. The network was equipped with a Cisco CallManager along with 100 fixed Cisco 7940 and 7912 IP telephones. For the wireless internet connection, Megabyte installed 4 WiFi Light Weight Access Points. Configuration and management of the antennas is carried out through a Cisco WLAN Controller.

RESULTS

By opting for a Cisco converged network, Altran Belgium's IT department can now perform minor interventions in the telephone system internally. Altran therefore saves on the costs of external technicians and significantly increases internal flexibility. Thanks to the switch to IP telephony, Altran has also gained a great deal in terms of physical space in the server room and is better placed to prevent overheating of the equipment. Employees now no longer need to call reception to connect with a colleague. And thanks to the Cisco wireless network, Altran consultants now have access to their e-mail from anywhere in the building via their laptop.





Two years ago, Altran's IT partner Megabyte had already suggested that the company converge the two networks. Megabyte had proposed a solution comprising exclusively Cisco equipment. "During my apprenticeships I had already had the chance to preview several examples of Cisco technology. I was always impressed by the possibilities they afforded. Megabyte's proposal was therefore entirely in line with my expectations. In addition to its products and services for large organisations, Cisco today also has a range of products and services for small to midsize business as well. IP telephony is therefore entirely within reach of organisations such as Altran. Moreover, Cisco's telephone exchange – contrary to other providers – does not convert the IP packets. I was keen to avoid hybrid solutions that support both digital IP signals and analogue signals. Such solutions come with a higher price tag and only limit the future possibilities. Throw in Cisco's long history in the field of IP telephony and the choice of product supplier was quickly made," says Robe.

IT PARTNER MEGABYTE INSTALLS IP TELEPHONY

For a comparable investment, Altran was able to opt for a new technology which would put the company in good stead for the future. The board was therefore quick to give the go ahead for the IP telephony project. In 2006, IT partner Megabyte installed a hundred odd IP telephones in Altran's three Belgian offices in Antwerp, Brussels and Tournai. In the Belgian headquarters in Brussels, the IT service provider installed a Cisco CallManager which now handles telephone traffic for the three offices. In Altran's small server room, Cisco's telephone exchange takes up less than half the space of the previous analogue exchange.

As a result, it is now easy to walk through the room which not only improves ventilation for both the exchange and the servers but also makes it much easier to perform maintenance or programme the system.

Altran's offices in Antwerp and Tournai are still currently connected to the CallManager via VPN. Soon, Altran will include these branches within a leased MPLS network. Such networks offer differentiated performance levels, the prioritising of data transmissions and support for voice and multimedia. Seeing as the infrastructure is now in place, Altran can easily include external branches within its IP telephony architecture. The organisation will, as a result, be expanding this architecture to include its offices in Luxembourg later in the year. In time, Altran also hope to equip its Dutch and Scandinavian colleagues with IP telephones. Even these offices will be able to be connected to the CallManager. Such flexibility is an enormous advantage for a midsize business such as Altran.

MAINTENANCE NOW AN INTERNAL AFFAIR

Altran's IT department is now able to take care of the management and operation of the CallManager. Even the disconnection and connection of the telephones is performed internally. That pushes IT costs down considerably. "Our IT department is not that large, which means simplified management is very welcome. In the end, the CallManager is not unlike a server in terms of operation. I now have, for instance, remote access to the company's telephone exchange. Even when I am abroad, I am still able to make adjustments if needed," explains Gauthier Robe.





Furthermore, Altran is able to rely on Megabyte at all times within the context of its minimal maintenance contract. Thanks to the Cisco SMARTnet service programme, Megabyte can also access Altran's CallManager in the event anything needs adjusting. «The simplification of telephony management was the most important motivation behind our decision to switch to IP telephony. The cost savings on internal communication are an added bonus. Communication within the group is after all not that prevalent. Our consultants are predominantly in contact with clients.»

Altran consultants mainly work from the client's office. Around 70 people work at the Brussels branch while there are around 750 consultants active with clients. In between projects, some of these consultants may find themselves in the office. Altran have therefore allowed for a margin of 30 extra IP telephones in addition to the 70 devices provided for personnel in Brussels. If a consultant happens to work from the Brussels head office, he/she will also be able to call from there. Altran employees also tend to (and like to) change office regularly. With IP telephony, that is no longer a problem. «Our colleagues now simply take their telephone with them. Moreover, they find it extremely convenient to have a screen with an integrated company phone book. In the past, they would have to call reception to be connected, even with colleagues in the same building! They are also very pleased with the possibilities with regard to conference calls. IP telephony may not have completely changed our way of working within the organisation but it has certainly simplified a great number of tasks,» clarifies Gauthier Robe.

STRICT SECURITY STANDARDS

Altran consultants, who often travel abroad, are also extremely pleased with the Unity Messaging function. This function converts voicemail messages into text and sends them to the consultant's inbox. Conversely, the consultant can now 'listen' to incoming e-mails via the telephone. Altran employs two VPN systems which allow consultants to connect securely to the computer network in Brussels.

Thanks to the centralised management of the switches, Altran was also able to create a local wireless network and a hotspot for visitors. Both are currently only used for data transmissions and not for telephony. For security reasons, the board allows visitors access to the internet via a strictly separate network only. The internal IT department is now also responsible for managing the wireless network infrastructure. If they wish to extend this network, the respective zones will automatically reconfigure themselves.

READY FOR THE FUTURE

Altran's operations are to a large extent decentralised. Nevertheless, the group is in the midst of constant evolution. «The company's information technology can under no circumstances form a barrier to that evolution. The Altran 2008 project is aimed at forming a single network for all the Northern European divisions. This will allow us, for instance, to use video conferencing. By opting for IP telephony, we have already opened new doors for our communication needs. And the new technology reinforces the company's image, both internally and externally. Altran profiles itself as an innovation partner: precisely for that reason we aim to stay at the cutting edge of technology,» concludes Gauthier Robe..