

Public Benefit Investment Partner: Community Voice Mail

The partnership between Cisco[®] and Community Voice Mail (CVM) demonstrates how a strategic investment of cash, products, and expertise can transform people's lives in powerful ways and increase their access to basic needs and economic opportunities.

Background

Community Voice Mail was established in Seattle in 1991 as the result of a simple idea with life-changing potential. The mission of Community Voice Mail is to provide free, personalized 24-hour voicemail numbers to people in crisis and transition—connecting them to jobs, housing, and hope. This service can also be used to seek refuge from domestic abuse, connect to social services and medical care, and stay in touch with family and friends.



Mel Cornelison found a job in three weeks after enrolling in CVM

In 1992, Community Voice Mail presented this idea to

Active Voice to request assistance. Recognizing the effectiveness of this simple solution to combat the complex and pervasive problem of poverty and homelessness, Active Voice donated a voicemail system to support their mission.

Community Voice Mail was awarded a US\$100,000 cash grant from the Ford Foundation and Harvard University in 1993 to replicate their innovative program in other communities. Although this increased CVM's distribution capabilities and the number of users who could benefit from their free voicemail service, it also introduced the challenge of a decentralized network with multiple servers, administrative needs at each location, and associated operating costs.

"Technology is changing daily, but homelessness and disenfranchisement are a continual problem. Cisco and CVM can best address these issues by combining CVM programs with Cisco technologies."

-Shannon Terry, Senior Network Administrator, Community Voice Mail

Partnership

After Cisco acquired Active Voice, a group of employees who were volunteering at CVM contacted the Cisco Foundation to request a grant on behalf of Community Voice Mail. One of the volunteers, Kevin Chesnut, was instrumental in demonstrating the value of the transformative solution provided by CVM, and the Cisco Foundation awarded a grant of US\$2.5 million over five years, as well as equipment and office space to help extend CVM services to the 50 most populated cities in the United States.

At the onset of the Cisco and Community Voice Mail partnership in 2003, more than 40 Cisco employees volunteered their time and expertise to assist with product development and the

implementation of new technologies. "Although CVM had been successful with many regional system deployments, we saw the possibility of providing a more scalable solution by centralizing the voice messaging service," explains Tim Fujita-Yuhas, Cisco UnityTM Product Manager.

To accomplish this objective, Cisco employees worked directly with CVM personnel to customize the Cisco Unity voicemail product to meet the specific needs of users, and created a centralized, nationwide distribution model for reduced operating costs, enhanced functionality, and greater efficiency. "One of the most rewarding aspects of the partnership is when we successfully upgrade the Cisco Unity product to accommodate CVM's requests," says Isabelle Kuhlmeyer, Cisco Unity Program Manager. "We meet with the CVM team on a monthly basis to discuss the types of features they'd like, and work to incorporate their needs into new product releases."

Results

By using Cisco technology and expertise to replace more than 30 site-based voicemail servers with a scalable, centralized system, Community Voice Mail has been able to cut costs by an estimated US\$13,000 per site, for a savings of nearly US\$500,000 per year.



Kevin Chestnut and Jennifer Brandon, Executive Director of CVM, accept the WSA Outstanding Contribution to the Community Award

In 2004, Community Voice Mail and Cisco received an award for Outstanding Contribution to the Community from the Washington Software Association (WSA), in recognition of the many improvements made to CVM's infrastructure and their expanded service capabilities.

The updated system also enabled CVM to provide 80,000 voicemail boxes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina for relief agencies to distribute among displaced persons.

"Our partnership is propelled by the fact that it's such an obvious win for us both that it makes sense," says Ed Masters, Cisco Unity Engineering Director. Since the

partnership began, more than 165,000 individuals have benefited from the Community Voice Mail service, and more than 2100 nonprofit agencies have distributed CVM contact numbers to their clients. The majority of beneficiaries who receive free contact numbers successfully achieve their goals of securing work, finding housing, receiving medical treatment, or ensuring their personal safety.

This partnership supports Cisco's social investment strategy, which aims to overcome the cycle of poverty and dependence through partnerships that encourage self-sufficiency, provide access to basic human needs, and help individuals enter the economic mainstream.



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