

Community Voice Mail Connects People to Opportunities

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 3 weeks after enrolling in CVM

In 1992, Community Voice Mail approached Active Voice for assistance with their program launch. Active Voice recognized the potential of this simple solution to combat the complex problems of poverty and homelessness, and donated a voicemail system to support CVM's mission.

CVM received 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 their 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 CVM. One of the volunteers, Kevin Chestnut, was instrumental in demonstrating the value of the transformative solution provided by CVM, and the Cisco Foundation awarded a grant of \$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 Unity™ 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 Kuhlmeier, 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 \$13,000 per site, for a savings of nearly \$500,000 per year.



Kevin Chestnut and Jennifer Brandon, Executive Director of CVM, accept the WSA 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.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the updated system enabled CVM to provide 80,000 voicemail boxes for relief agencies to distribute among displaced persons in the U.S. Gulf Coast region.

“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 300,000 individuals have benefited from the CVM 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 within seven months.

In 2008, CVM received the prestigious Directors’ Nonprofit Award from the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy (CECP). CECP honored CVM for creating a meaningful solution that helps poor and homeless individuals overcome a fundamental obstacle on the road to stability and self-sufficiency. Cisco nominated CVM for the award and received recognition for having a transformative impact on the success and scope of CVM.

The Cisco Foundation also renewed their commitment to CVM in 2008, with a three-year, \$1.9 million grant to support their continued growth and expansion

The CVM partnership supports Cisco’s social investment strategy, which aims to overcome cycles of poverty and dependence through partnerships that provide access to basic human needs and help individuals enter the economic mainstream.

To learn more, please visit www.cvm.org.