



Apparel Manufacturer Uses Real-Time Conferencing Tools for International Efficiency

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Manufacturing—Apparel and textiles

Customer Profile

Founded in 1938, Portland, Oregon-based Columbia Sportswear is a leading manufacturer of active outdoor apparel, with 3,000 employees internationally and revenues of U.S.\$1.2 billion in 2006.

Business Situation

With its supply chain partners located in Asia, Columbia needed a way to help employees collaborate effectively even when they were traveling so that it could speed up its product development cycle.

Solution

Columbia deployed Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 to increase real-time communications capabilities and reduce the number of third-party collaboration applications IT personnel had to manage.

Benefits

- Improved collaboration
- Easy adoption
- Faster decision making
- Simpler IT management

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Oregon-based Columbia Sportswear is a leading manufacturer of outdoor apparel. Its employees conduct business with suppliers and retailers around the world, and the company frequently searches for ways to increase the efficiency and productivity of its workers who travel. Columbia had already deployed Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007 with Unified Messaging and Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2005 for instant messaging (IM) and presence awareness. It sought to expand its employees' communications options by upgrading to Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 and deploying IP-based devices from LG-Nortel and GN. Now employees have enhanced real-time communications capabilities, including audio, video, and Web conferencing and software-powered voice over IP (VoIP). Columbia also avoided the cost of an upgrade to VoIP networks and eliminated the use of public IM applications.



Situation

Portland, Oregon-based Columbia Sportswear is a leading manufacturer of outdoor gear, including apparel, footwear, and camping equipment. Columbia distributes its products to more than 13,000 retailers in 76 countries, and its 2006 revenues were U.S.\$1.2 billion. The company's 3,000 employees are divided almost equally between domestic and international locations, and about 20 percent of its 1,600 U.S.-based employees travel frequently. They visit factories throughout Asia, or confer with suppliers of fabric or other components.

With its supply chain partners located in Asia, Columbia needed a way to help employees collaborate effectively even when they were traveling. "We're trying to speed up our development cycle and decrease the time it takes from the day we first draw a garment to the day we sell it," says Mike Leeper, Windows Systems Manager for Columbia Sportswear. "The faster we can get decisions made, the better it is for the company."

In 2006, Columbia deployed Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007 Enterprise Edition with Unified Messaging, which gives Columbia employees an integrated inbox for e-mail, voice mail, and faxes. However, the company wanted to derive even more productivity from its communications infrastructure and try to overcome the inherent delays with the exchange of e-mail and voice mail. "Everyone gets more out of their day if it's easier for people to communicate beyond their cubicle," Leeper says.

Columbia decided it needed to improve its real-time communications capabilities. It used Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2005, along with public tools, for instant messaging (IM). Employees appreciated that flexibility; however, IT was concerned about the potential security risks

the public IM tools posed. The company also used a Web-based conferencing application that employees found unwieldy. The application offered visuals through the monitor, and audio through traditional telephone lines. "Unfortunately," Leeper says, "the Web-based conferencing application was so hard to manage that we had to have a help-desk engineer schedule the meetings."

At the same time, Columbia realized that it could improve communication and interaction with employees globally by expanding its IM capabilities. "We deal with language barriers, but written English is always easier than spoken English," says Leeper, who notes the importance of clear communication in the precision of the manufacturing world, where tens might be confused with tenths.

Columbia needed to give employees a way to communicate in real time and, at the same time, allay concerns about IT security and complexity. "We needed to provide our users with a broader set of tools for their communications needs," says Leeper. "When staff travels internationally, we want to extend their ability to stay in touch."

Solution

To improve its employees' communications capabilities, in July 2007, Columbia Sportswear deployed Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 and the client application, Microsoft Office Communicator 2007. The technologies provide enhanced IM and presence—the ability to quickly see the availability and contact preferences of other people on the network—along with software-powered voice over IP (VoIP) and conferencing capabilities. Because the software integrates with Microsoft Office programs, employees can move smoothly between the different modes of communication while working in applications they use every day. Columbia also deployed Microsoft Office Communicator Web Access, the Web

version of the client software, to accommodate employees that use Linux-based and Macintosh computers.

Columbia chose the Microsoft software over solutions from its network and Private Branch Exchange (PBX) vendors because it was able to easily integrate the Microsoft technologies with its current hardware. "We were able to gain new capabilities with essentially just an upgrade from what we had with Live Communications Server 2005," says Leeper. "We don't have to incur the cost of upgrading to new hardware."

Columbia worked with Microsoft Services, which provides consulting expertise, and Gold Systems, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner specializing in voice-driven solutions for unified communications. Gold Systems integrates Office Communications Server 2007 and other Microsoft software with customers' telephony infrastructure, including PBXs, VoIP services, and mobile devices. The Columbia upgrade from Live Communications Server 2005 to Office Communications Server 2007 added a variety of useful features, especially in relation to presence capabilities. The new software offers improved options in the presence profile, giving employees more flexibility in terms of revealing their availability. For instance, employees can limit access and still be available to their staff or superiors. Another key feature is the ability to conduct group conversations by using IM.

When Columbia added Unified Messaging in 2006, it originally installed an 8-channel Dialogic® DMG1008DNIW Media Gateway to connect Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 with the company's PBX. When the company installed Office Communications Server 2007, it added a Dialogic DMG2030DTI Media Gateway, with an additional 23 channels to increase capacity for the new unified communications features, and IP endpoints for users. Dialogic offers a range

of enterprise-class media gateway products to support Microsoft unified communications solutions. Dialogic Media Gateways are designed for simplicity, PBX interoperability, and price performance, and they are backed by a worldwide distribution and support organization.

In addition, Columbia deployed a variety of IP-based phones, handsets, and headsets from LG-Nortel and GN. These included the LG-Nortel IP Phone 8540, LG-Nortel USB Phone 8501 handset, and Jabra GN2000 USB headset (from GN). "We wanted to present users with as many options as we could, so that we would replicate what they were already using," says Leeper. "If they already had a headset, we wanted to offer them a similar headset."

Columbia also deployed the Microsoft RoundTable™ conferencing and collaboration device, which integrates with Office Communications Server 2007 and incorporates a camera that provides a 360-degree view of participants in a conference room. The device tracks the flow of the conversation, focusing the view on the person who is speaking.

Because the handsets, headsets, and RoundTable device were designed to integrate with Office Communications Server 2007, they do not require drivers or software. "They just plugged in and worked," says Leeper. Although employees using the handsets and headsets encountered initial issues with sound quality, upgraded firmware improved their experience with the phones considerably.

Columbia will also be taking advantage of the federation capabilities of Office Communications Server 2007, which means it will be able to integrate its real-time communications capabilities with partners and suppliers that also use the application. "If

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they are also running Office Communications Server 2007, we will be able to communicate in an encrypted environment,” says Leeper.

Currently, some 450 users have been upgraded to Office Communications Server 2007, with further upgrades to be scheduled based on user request and IT resource availability.

Benefits

With the deployment of Office Communications Server 2007 and the associated devices, Columbia Sportswear expects to improve its employees’ abilities to collaborate even across time zones. It also expects to ease the burden on its IT department by eliminating several third-party communication applications and providing an integrated solution that serves multiple operating systems.

Improved Collaboration

Columbia was able to add real-time communications capabilities, and enhance the ability of employees to communicate even when they were traveling, when it upgraded to Office Communications Server 2007. The upgrade also gives employees consistent IM capabilities from a single vendor (as opposed to multiple IM vendors) and the ability to have group IM sessions. The use of IM has also helped improve communication with employees who speak English as a second language. “English is the common language in our offices, and it’s easier to convey in writing,” Leeper says. “That’s where we see the biggest win with instant messaging provided by Office Communications Server 2007.”

Other real-time functionality includes audio, video, and Web conferencing capabilities, which are easier to use than previously used third-party applications. Because Columbia uses the federation feature of Office Communications Server 2007, it can also

collaborate easily with partners and suppliers who have the same application. “Federation is great,” says Leeper. “With a partner who is running Office Communications Server 2007, we will be able to communicate about orders and designs with highly secure IM.”

Easy Adoption

Because the new solution incorporates traditional Windows® operating system architecture, Columbia found that it was easy for users to adopt it. “Office Communications Server 2007 brought technology to our employees that is easy to use,” says Leeper. “Now they can work better wherever they are.”

Employees had a similar reaction to the new IP-based voice devices. “The usability is good, and the interface is crisp and intuitive,” Leeper says. “The interfaces for the devices from LG-Nortel look like what you’d expect Windows[-based] applications to look like, and the users have taken to them without a whole lot of training.”

Faster Decision Making

Because Office Communications Server 2007 is integrated with Microsoft Office programs, employees can now take advantage of presence capabilities in their Office desktop programs to gauge the availability of colleagues for consultation. This means decisions are discussed and resolved more quickly than if colleagues left strings of voice-mail or e-mail messages.

“Office Communications Server 2007 helps our employees control their communication in various forms,” says Leeper. “Instant messaging especially enhances their ability to keep driving forward to meet deadlines, because there isn’t the inherent delay in waiting for a reply.”

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Simpler IT Management

Leeper is pleased about the ability to manage multiple software licenses and support issues through one vendor. “I can manage my licenses through a single entity now that we’ve deployed an integrated solution with Office Communications Server 2007. We don’t have to track thousands of independent licenses.”

Similarly, with the deployment of Office Communications Server 2007, IT was able to eliminate the use of third-party IM and video-conferencing applications. This reduced its management and administration needs, as did the fact that the Microsoft applications were all consistent regarding the way they are managed. “The management of Office Communications Server 2007 is familiar to our IT group. We understand the tools and the setup, so we are able to support it without adding head count,” says Leeper. “Now I have an application that works across my entire environment, even on computers with different operating systems.”

Leeper’s team also has less to worry about regarding security now that it is offering a consistent IM tool, rather than allowing employees to use various public IM tools. “Although we have never had a security problem with public IM, we knew the potential was always there,” says Leeper. “Our goal is to start locking down the other options as soon as we give the employees a viable alternative with Office Communications Server 2007.”

Leeper is also pleased with the plug-and-play capabilities of the voice devices. “We were delighted by how easily the headsets, handsets, and camera gear plugged in and worked with Office Communications Server 2007. We didn’t have to deal with drivers. That eliminated both setup concerns and issues with user support.”

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Gold Systems products and services, call (303) 447-2774 or visit the Web site at: www.goldsys.com

For more information about Columbia Sportswear products and services, call (503) 985-4000 or visit the Web site at: www.columbiasportswear.com

Microsoft Office System

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For more information about the Microsoft Office system, go to: www.microsoft.com/office

Software and Services

- Microsoft Office
 - Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007
 - Microsoft Office Communicator 2007
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Enterprise Edition
- Technologies
 - Microsoft Office Communicator Web Access

Hardware

- Dell 2950 server computer
- Dialogic DMG1008DNIW and DMG2030DTI Media Gateways
- Jabra GN2000 USB headsets
- LG-Nortel IP Phone 8540
- LG-Nortel USB Phone 8501 handsets
- Microsoft RoundTable device

Partners

- Gold Systems