

Federal Agency Reduces Travel Costs with Remote Meetings

The United States Postal Service saves meeting costs and conducts training efficiently with Web and voice conferencing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE

- Federal Government
- Washington, DC
- 700,000 employees

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

- Reduce travel and training costs
- Train employees more efficiently
- Simplify voice and Web conferencing

SOLUTION

- Deployed Cisco Unified MeetingPlace on premises
- Deployed easy conferencing for training and holding meetings in-house
- Outsourced system administration and user support

BUSINESS RESULTS

- Reduced annual travel costs by US\$10 million (expected)
- Reduced voice conferencing costs by 50 percent
- Increased monthly usage from 400,000 minutes to 2.5 million minutes in the first year

Business Challenge

The United States Postal Service (USPS) employs more than 700,000 employees at more than 38,000 postal facilities. It has one of the world's largest private IP networks, using more than 25,000 Cisco® routers. As a self-supporting federal agency, the USPS receives no tax dollars from the federal government for operations, and pays its expenses using revenue from the sales of postage and postage-related products.

Part of the Postal Service's Strategic Transformation Plan 2006–2010 is to continually look for ways to reduce costs such as travel expenses for employee training. The agency conducts frequent training for mail carriers, retail associates, and postmasters on topics such as rate changes and how to use new Web-based applications. "When we only have one month to train tens of thousands of employees, providing on-site training is not feasible, and sending

written materials or CDs is costly," says James Shipman, Advanced Computing Environment program manager for USPS. "We calculated that an effective virtual conferencing solution could reduce annual travel costs by more than US\$10 million."

USPS previously used a PC-based solution to share desktop views, but the software could not scale to accommodate the 40 to 100 people who might attend training sessions or regional operational meetings. "To expand Web conferencing to all departments, we needed an enterprise-class solution," Shipman says.

The Postal Service preferred a single system for integrated voice and Web conferencing, both to simplify the employee experience and to make it easier to manage meetings. "An on-premises conferencing system would be more secure than a third-party conferencing service because we could control access to content used during training and meetings," says Shipman. "It would also be less costly, particularly as our volume increased." The conferencing system would need to integrate with the agency's 500 private branch exchange (PBX) systems and more than 7000 smaller key systems.

“To meet our mission, USPS strives to standardize, centralize, and simplify its technology. Our new on-premises, managed solution for voice as well as Web conferencing supports all three goals as an enabler for greater organizational agility. It’s part of the Postal Service’s effort to increase productivity.”

—Bob Otto, Chief Technology Officer, United States Postal Service

Network Solution

After evaluating Web conferencing solutions, USPS IT selected the Cisco Unified MeetingPlace solution with outsourced system administration and help-desk support from the Cisco Managed Solutions organization. For redundancy, the servers are hosted in two USPS data centers, each with a high-speed network connection. “This solution blends the benefits of a dedicated on-network conferencing solution with the convenience of an outsourced conferencing service,” says Shipman.

Cisco Managed Services accommodates the agency’s strict security requirements, which include security clearance for help desk agents and other personnel with access to the Cisco Unified MeetingPlace system. Cisco also provides ongoing education to encourage postal employees to use Cisco Unified MeetingPlace. Educational programs include e-mail campaigns, an end-user information portal, online training classes, and short online tutorials on specific topics. “Everyone involved has taken extra care to ensure that the service directly meets the unique needs of USPS,” says Shipman.

The solution was deployed in just seven weeks, including integration with the existing Microsoft Active Directory and Microsoft Exchange servers and PBX systems. “Rapid deployment of the network solution was instrumental in helping us achieve our goals for virtual meetings and remote training,” says Shipman.

USPS uses Cisco Unified MeetingPlace to conduct Web-based training, business meetings with presentations, and voice conferences. Employees use Microsoft Outlook to schedule meetings and training sessions and to send out e-mail invitations to meeting attendees. Participants simply click the link in their invitation to join the conference. The meeting organizer can record the session for later playback. Meeting organizers and participants can see a list of attendees, further adding to the security of the conferencing solution.

For the month preceding postal rate changes in May 2007, the Postal Service used Cisco Unified MeetingPlace extensively to train retail personnel and carriers about the new rates. Before previous rate changes, trainers had to fly or drive to a centralized location. This time, trainers conducted training session without leaving their offices, using Cisco Unified MeetingPlace. Responding to a usage survey that the IT department administered, a trainer in Oklahoma reported training 1600 employees “without traveling a single mile.” Another trainer, in California, trained more than 1200 employees in approximately 30 sessions, also without travel time or expense.

Some agency districts have used Cisco Unified MeetingPlace to provide refresher training for carrier pickup services, which are based on an internal Web application. The presenter provides the Web-based training to a small group of carriers and sends a link to the recorded session to all other carriers and postmasters so that they can view the recorded training session at a convenient

time. USPS also recently used Unified MeetingPlace to provide training for some of the agency's 150,000 e-mail users on new federal data retention policies for e-mail. "With Cisco Unified MeetingPlace, we trained thousands of employees on new e-mail retention policies in just one month," says Shipman. "Previously, training would have taken six months to a year."

Business Results

Reduced Travel and Conferencing Costs

Shipman estimates that USPS can save over US\$10 million in annual travel costs by replacing many in-person meetings with voice and Web conferences. After the first 10 months that Cisco Unified MeetingPlace was available, one employee reduced travel costs to less than US\$1500, compared to more than US\$10,000 during the same period the previous year. "With virtual meetings, I personally have replaced two monthly recurring meetings that previously required travel," Shipman says. "Reducing travel also increases productivity and job satisfaction because employees do not waste valuable time in long security lines or have to spend the night in cramped hotel rooms." USPS is forecasting 25 million minutes of usage for Cisco Unified MeetingPlace conferencing during the first year, and 50 million minutes annually thereafter.

USPS pays a per-minute rate for voice and Web conferencing service, paying only for services it uses. "And the more minutes we use, the lower our per-minute cost, which makes us highly motivated to move all our conferencing usage to Unified MeetingPlace," says Shipman. "When we do, we expect to reduce our annual voice conferencing costs by 50 percent. Not only are we saving money, but our meetings are richer and more effective because they combine voice and Web conferencing."

Simplified Conferencing

Employees schedule a voice or Web conference the same way they currently schedule a meeting with Microsoft Outlook. "Just one extra click sets up a Web conference," says Shipman. In the first year, monthly usage for Web and voice increased from 400,000 minutes to 2.5 million minutes.

More Effective Meetings

Cisco Unified MeetingPlace simulates what happens in a physical conference room. Participants can see who is speaking and use a whiteboard, and the organizer can mute participants who introduce noise such as traffic sounds. "We appreciate the additional services that make meetings even more effective than face-to-face meetings, in some ways," Shipman says. For example, the presenter can control what participants see, preventing them from flipping ahead in a document and paying less attention to the presenter. Participants can also establish breakout meetings in private chat rooms.

Increased Security

As a federal agency, USPS has a fiduciary obligation to protect citizen trust and confidential information. Hosting the conferencing system in USPS data centers reduces opportunities for system breaches by outsiders or unmanaged access to corporate data.

Next Steps

USPS will soon begin using Cisco Unified MeetingPlace for reservationless voice and Web conferences. USPS also plans to investigate its video capabilities for high-level meetings, further enhancing the in-person feeling of virtual meetings.

“To meet our mission, USPS strives to standardize, centralize, and simplify its technology,” says Bob Otto, chief technology officer for USPS. “Our new on-premises, managed solution for voice as well as Web conferencing supports all three goals as an enabler for greater organizational agility. It’s part of the Postal Service’s effort to increase productivity.”

PRODUCT LIST

Routing and Switching

- Cisco 6500 Series Routers
- Cisco Catalyst® 2900 Series Switches
- Cisco 7400 Series Routers in post offices
Broadband Cable

Security

- Cisco PIX® Firewalls
- Cisco Adaptive Security Appliances with
Intrusion Detection System modules

Voice and Unified Communications

- Cisco Unified MeetingPlace

For More Information

To learn more about Cisco Unified Communications products and services, visit:

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