



Multiple-Campus University Improves Collaboration with Unified Communications

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Education—Universities

Customer Profile

Friends University is a private Christian university based in Wichita, Kansas, with 3,500 students and 500 employees spread among three campuses and other outreach locations across the state.

Business Situation

Friends wanted to improve conferencing across locations. It also wanted to improve communications for traveling employees and replace an aging voice-mail system.

Solution

Friends deployed a solution built on Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 and Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, providing conferencing and unified messaging in a rich collaboration environment.

Benefits

- A low-cost solution
- Collaboration and flexibility across distances
- Integration with other applications
- Reliability and efficiency in IT
- Foundation for future improvements

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Kevin Lyerla, Technology Infrastructure Manager, Friends University

Friends University, a private university based in Wichita, Kansas, wanted to improve conferencing across its three statewide campuses. Several Friends faculty and staff members also traveled frequently and sought streamlined communications while on the road. Additionally, Friends needed to replace an aging voice-mail system. To address these needs, Friends deployed a solution based on Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 and Microsoft Exchange Server 2007. A campus licensing agreement made the Microsoft unified communications solution dramatically less expensive than alternatives. The solution provides remote conferencing and unified messaging in a user-friendly way, effectively integrating with other applications. The university has also taken advantage of the solution to improve IT operations, providing a foundation for future enhancements to collaborative technology.



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Situation

Friends University is a private, Christian-based, liberal arts university with a Quaker heritage. Founded in 1898 in Wichita, Kansas, it now has three campuses across the state and additional outreach programs in rural areas of Kansas. Enrollment has more than doubled in the last 12 years, making Friends the largest independent institution of higher learning in the state. The university now has more than 3,000 students and employs 500 faculty and staff members.

With locations separated by approximately 400 miles, Friends faced a particular challenge when it came to collaboration among full-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and administrative staff. Distance made face-to-face meetings difficult, yet substitutes such as telephone conference calls were not as rewarding or productive.

To facilitate communication among faculty, staff, and students, Friends was using Microsoft® Office Live Communications Server 2005. Kevin Lyerla, the university's Technology Infrastructure Manager, says that limited features reduced its acceptance in the general user population. “When we learned about the expanded features that Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 offers, it seemed like a natural progression,” he says.

Lyerla was particularly intrigued by the potential of the conferencing components in Office Communications Server 2007 to facilitate meetings across campuses. He was also interested in improving and consolidating messaging functions at the university, because some adjuncts and staff were frequent travelers. When teaching at remote sites or traveling across the state in other outreach efforts, they wanted to be better connected to their e-mail and telephone messages.

For example, the athletic director traveled frequently to recruit student-athletes and to attend sporting events. While on the road, he would have to call in to check voice-mail messages, log on to check e-mail messages, and struggle to collaborate with his staff on campus to perform other functions of the office.

The Friends IT environment included numerous Microsoft products, and its messaging was powered by Microsoft Exchange Server 2003 running on a single server computer that had six information stores. For its telephony, Friends was using an Avaya Definity G3 Private Branch Exchange (PBX) tied to an Avaya Intuity Audix Release voice-mail system. “A motivating factor for me was that our existing voice-mail system was quickly becoming outdated,” says Lyerla. “I couldn't guarantee that it would continue to provide effective service. We needed to move to another product.”

Friends University was seeking one or more solutions that would address its needs for remote conferencing, effective communications for traveling employees, and a new voice-mail system.

Solution

Because the university's primary need was for remote conferencing, Lyerla examined products such as WebEx and GoToMeeting. “But we quickly saw that these solutions were not going to be financially viable for us,” he says. Instead, Friends learned that it could save money by upgrading to Office Communications Server 2007 under a campus license agreement. Thanks to the expanded features of the new Microsoft solution, Lyerla could also use it to replace the outdated voice-mail system. And because the product could integrate with the existing Avaya system, the university would not need to purchase a new PBX.

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Kevin Lyerla, Technology Infrastructure Manager, Friends University

Furthermore, by also upgrading to Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, Friends could gain unified messaging. Lyerla could take advantage of the integration between Office Communications Server 2007 voice components and Exchange Server 2007 to present users with a single point at which to receive both their voice-mail and e-mail messages.

For technical assistance, Friends turned to SKT Business Communications, a systems integrator that focuses on unified communications. A Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, SKT is a national leader in integrating voice, video, messaging, and collaboration. Lyerla had been employed at SKT before moving to Friends. “It was a natural marriage for us,” he says, “because of my comfort with the people at SKT and their services. I knew that SKT was a well-rounded service provider for our region, so we engaged with it on a long-term service option.”

Jonathan Shaver, Unified Communications Specialist at SKT, says, “Friends University has been an early adopter of communications technology, because they understand that a rich technology experience improves students’ education and quality of life. For this project, Kevin had a great vision of extending real-time communication and collaboration among faculty, staff, and students, and we were delighted to work with him to achieve that vision.”

In June 2007, SKT started working with Friends to install Office Communications Server 2007 and Microsoft Office Communicator 2007. Implementation of the voice features was completed by September of that year. In February 2008, SKT helped Friends to upgrade to Exchange Server 2007 with Unified Messaging. That environment was set up by May 2008, and the new solution—which includes the voice and

conferencing capabilities of Office Communications Server 2007 in addition to Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging—is rolling out to 280 faculty, staff, and adjunct users during June and July. In a second phase, toward the end of 2008, the university will migrate all of its students over to the new solution as well.

The implementation has gone quite smoothly. Lyerla says, “The only struggles that we’ve had were with our existing Avaya PBX, because it was approximately 15 years old and had had some lapses in maintenance. So we faced some challenges in implementing a few functions, such as the transfer of caller ID information between the two systems, but with great help from SKT and Microsoft, we worked these issues out successfully.”

In a pilot project for the new voice-mail system, completed in May 2008, Friends migrated several users in the IT department. “There’s been a lot of enthusiasm,” Lyerla says, “and people outside the department are now clamoring to get these new functions, too.”

Friends runs Office Communications Server 2007 on VMware virtual servers. The software integrates with the Avaya PBX and an AudioCodes Mediant 1000 Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) gateway, with one Primary Rate Interface tie from the PBX to the gateway. User phones currently include about 60 LG-Nortel USB Phone 8501 handsets and 30 LG-Nortel IP Phone 8540 devices.

Exchange Server 2007 runs on one physical Dell 1950 server computer and two virtual Dell 6850 servers. The university had already deployed Microsoft Office Professional 2007, including the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2007 messaging and collaboration client. Thus, users now receive both their e-mail messages and their voice-mail messages in their Office Outlook 2007 inboxes. When they are not at

their desks, users can access messages by using Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access or Office Outlook Voice Access. Also, a small number of users on the administrative staff use Microsoft Office Communicator Mobile on Windows Mobile® 6 devices.

Benefits

Friends University has improved its conferencing with a low-cost unified communications solution that integrates with other applications and provides IT benefits such as mail server redundancy. The solution also sets the stage for future improvements in collaboration.

A Low-Cost Solution

Lyerla used the Microsoft unified communications solution to achieve his goals at minimum cost. He says, "The Microsoft campus license agreements put Office Communications Server 2007 far above any competitors in this arena financially. The benefits we get as an educational institution made our choice remarkably easy."

Lyerla was particularly pleased that he could retain his existing PBX. "With Office Communications Server 2007, we have been able to replace our outdated voice-mail system while gaining a little more time with our PBX system. We will move to a new phone system eventually, but for now we're able to save money and check out our prospects."

At partner SKT, Shaver agrees that the financial benefits are substantial. "Because Friends already owned the Exchange Server licensing, the university gained a huge cost savings as opposed to buying a new voice-mail system, a new voice over IP phone solution, and a new unified messaging solution. With Office Communications Server 2007, they were able to roll all those features into their current infrastructure," he says.

Collaboration and Flexibility Across Distances

Friends University faculty, staff, and adjuncts can now collaborate more easily across the three campuses. They can use webcams to include a video component for meetings, and the presence awareness features of Office Communications Server 2007 help users to quickly see when others are free to talk or busy teaching or traveling.

For example, the athletic director uses Office Communications Server 2007 conferencing to collaborate on documents with staff back in the office while he is on the road. "The features of Office Communications Server 2007 have made these long-haul travel situations much more painless for him," Lyerla says.

Traveling employees also appreciate the flexibility of having a single point of contact, thanks to unified messaging. Lyerla says, "They can work flexibly without having to worry about checking voice mail over here and e-mail over there. In fact, Outlook Voice Access is a particularly cool feature that people immediately gravitate to. They say, 'Wow, it will read my e-mail to me? And I can respond with a .wav file or cancel a calendar item, all by phone?' Even my supervisor, an associate vice-president who is not a technical person, has really embraced the technologies that are associated with Office Communications Server 2007."

Integration with Other Applications

Lyerla especially appreciates the way the Microsoft unified communications solution integrates with other applications. "The integration of Office Communicator 2007 and Office Outlook 2007 makes many of the new features particularly user-friendly," he says. "I've also been impressed with the way Office Communications Server 2007 integrates with the phone handsets. Having voice-mail messages, call logs, and a touch screen that

has a full-featured directory lookup available on the device has been very appealing to users.”

Users of mobile devices have also appreciated the integration on their devices. “They say that it’s fantastic to use Office Communicator Mobile to pull up their contact list, communicate, chat, respond quickly to a message, and move on to their next task,” Lyerla says.

He also takes advantage of the integration and familiar interface to improve flexibility within the IT department. The university was already a Microsoft-centric environment, and now administrators can streamline their management tasks using the Active Directory® service and the Exchange Management Shell in Exchange Server 2007. “The way that all the Microsoft unified communications products work together, this is an easy choice for us on total cost of ownership. Office Communications Server 2007 has been easy to purchase, easy to implement, and easy to maintain.”

Reliability and Efficiency in IT

Lyerla hopes to take advantage of features in Exchange Server 2007 to improve the reliability of his systems and the efficiency of managing them. “Because we had a single Exchange Server 2003 computer, we faced significant risks,” he says. “If that server computer suffered a failure, we were looking at a complete mail outage for our environment. But we plan to take advantage of the cluster continuous replication feature in Exchange Server 2007 to give us more redundancy in information stores and availability in rapid recovery.”

Lyerla also plans to take advantage of the Exchange Management Shell, based on the Windows PowerShell™ command-line interface, to develop scripts for common IT tasks such as user account provisioning and

de-provisioning. “We have two individuals currently performing these tasks, and I expect these scripting features to reduce their workload by 20 to 30 percent,” he says.

Foundation for Future Improvements

Friends University also has a small pilot program involving Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007, and Lyerla is impressed with the integration between Office SharePoint Server 2007 and Office Communications Server 2007. “I’m anxious to take advantage of these features to give faculty, staff, and students remote access to files,” he says. “We’re currently doing that with a very large file server through FTP, and the security risks keep me awake at night.”

Indeed, Lyerla has talked with members of the university’s administrative computing department about the university’s future internal portal system. “We were potentially going to deploy a portal system from the vendor of our enterprise resource planning system, but we have become very frustrated with that product. The pilot project with Office SharePoint Server 2007 has been going well, and over the next year we’ll be examining whether we might go in that direction. From my perspective, integrating that project with the unified communications benefits we’ve gained from Office Communications Server 2007 suggests that we have a very bright future in achieving better collaboration across the university.”

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For more information about SKT Business Communications products and services, call (800) 524-1657 or visit the Web site at: www.sktbcs.com

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 - Microsoft Office Communicator Mobile
 - Microsoft Office Outlook 2007
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007
 - Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007
- Windows Mobile 6
- Technologies
 - Microsoft Office Outlook Voice Access
 - Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access

Hardware

- AudioCodes Mediant 1000 Session Initiation Protocol gateway
- LG-Nortel USB Phone 8501 handsets
- LG-Nortel IP Phone 8540 devices
- Avaya Definity G3 PBX
- Dell 1950 and 6850 server computers

Partners

- SKT Business Communications