

THOMPSON COBURN LLP

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Professional services—Legal

Customer Profile

Thompson Coburn is a full-service law firm with offices in Chicago, St. Louis (headquarters), southern Illinois, and Washington, D.C. It employs approximately 750 attorneys and staff.

Business Situation

Thompson Coburn wanted to replace aging telephony hardware, expand communications options for employees, improve video conferencing, and provide a foundation for future communications enhancements.

Solution

Thompson Coburn deployed a unified communications solution built on Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007 and integrated it with its internal customer relationship management software.

Benefits

- Increased communication options for attorneys
- Enhanced video conferencing
- Low-cost solution
- Improved reliability
- Automatic data collection

Law Firm Empowers Attorneys and Reduces Costs by Using Unified Communications

“With Office Communications Server 2007, each user can ask, ‘What’s the best method to contact this person right now? Am I going to waste our time?’ That’s better, faster, and cheaper.”

Phillip Rightler, Chief Information Officer, Thompson Coburn

Thompson Coburn LLP, a regional firm with 340 attorneys, needed to address its aging Private Branch Exchange hardware. Wanting to use technology to improve client service, it also sought to enhance communications for staff by offering more options (including video) and by streamlining the contact process. The company deployed a solution based on Microsoft® Office Communications Server 2007. The solution lowers the firm’s telephony costs, helps attorneys to identify the best methods to reach colleagues, and supports enhanced video conferencing. Thompson Coburn will integrate the new software with its proprietary customer relationship management application, Firm Contact Manager, to provide attorneys with additional information about incoming calls. The firm expects to derive business value from new forms of communications data that the solution will help collect.



“Our telephone maintenance costs will go down. Our software costs with Microsoft will go up a little bit with Office Communications Server 2007, but in the aggregate our telephony costs will go down.”

Phillip Rightler, Chief Information Officer,
Thompson Coburn

Situation

Thompson Coburn LLP is a full-service law firm with offices in St. Louis, Missouri; Washington, D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; and Belleville, Illinois. The firm has a staff of about 750, including 340 attorneys.

A key strategic objective at Thompson Coburn is to use innovative technology to improve client service. The firm's IT department has an internal team that is tasked with developing custom applications that can improve attorneys' ability to serve clients. "Attorneys want to deal with their clients in real time if at all possible," says Phillip Rightler, Chief Information Officer at Thompson Coburn. "They want to be able to take calls immediately, no matter where they are, no matter what they're doing. Most attorneys juggle multiple cases and they need to keep avenues of communication open for all of them. That's what they expect of themselves; that's how responsive they want to be to their clients."

Thus, a key component of the firm's IT strategy is to invest in technologies that help streamline communication. "We want to make it easier for our users to communicate," says Rightler. "A key to accomplishing that is to make communications available through more avenues such as a handheld device, a portable computer, a home computer, or a computer at a hotel kiosk." Attorneys are also interested in enhanced forms of communication such as video conferencing.

Telephony at Thompson Coburn involved three networked Avaya Definity G3 Private Branch Exchange (PBX) systems, plus a Nortel Option 11 PBX in the Chicago office, which the firm inherited after a merger. "Not having our PBX systems networked was a business problem that we needed to resolve," says Rightler. "We needed to either buy another old Avaya, find some creative ways to

network the Nortel, or replace all four systems. Given the firm's interest in always moving ahead with technology, and the risk of failure with the old systems, the business decision was simple."

Rightler hoped that Thompson Coburn could also reduce costs by replacing the traditional PBX systems with more powerful systems that would make voice over IP (VoIP) connections possible. His department had been studying VoIP for some time but was moving slowly because of concerns about reliability. "The firm just can't be in a situation where attorneys don't have a dial tone," says Rightler.

Thompson Coburn was using Microsoft® Office Live Communications Server 2005 for some of its communications, including the start-up of an internal instant messaging program. "We didn't know how widely our employees would adopt instant messaging or what kind of impact it would have," says Rightler, "but it proved to be fairly successful, especially with our younger attorneys and IT staff, and helped to cut down e-mail clutter and to streamline communications. We took that as an indicator that we should aggressively pursue a more expansive communications capability."

Thompson Coburn hoped to replace its aging PBXs with a more powerful system that could streamline communication for users, facilitate increased VoIP and video conferencing, and provide a stable, reliable foundation for future enhancements to the firm's communications technology.

Solution

"We're very Microsoft-centered in our technology base," says Rightler. He describes word processing as the engine of a law firm and notes that Thompson Coburn uses Microsoft Office Word 2003, along with the rest of the Microsoft Office suite, including

“By using Office Communications Server 2007 to combine our telephony and our contacts, we can create a platform that we can use to derive additional business value.”

Phillip Rightler, Chief Information Officer,
Thompson Coburn

the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2003 messaging and collaboration client. (The firm plans to upgrade to the 2007 Microsoft Office system soon.) “We want to take advantage of all that we can out of that product suite,” he says.

For its communications software needs, Thompson Coburn looked aggressively at upgrading to Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007. “We didn’t see many alternatives to consider,” says Rightler. “We expect to use Microsoft as much as possible, and we have an Enterprise Agreement with Microsoft so we were already licensed to some extent.” In February 2008, Thompson Coburn committed to begin the upgrade project.

When implementation is complete, Thompson Coburn will run Office Communications Server 2007 and the Microsoft Office Communicator 2007 client on several Dell PowerEdge 1950 and 860 server computers. The solution includes presence awareness features that display other people’s availability and status—whether they are available to talk, are busy, are in a meeting, or are traveling—from within Microsoft productivity software such as Office Outlook 2003.

Thompson Coburn also has three Microsoft RoundTable™ conferencing and collaboration devices, which it plans to use for video conferencing. By using RoundTable to host meetings, attendees who connect remotely through a computer can see a 360-degree panoramic view of participants in a conference room. In the image, the speaker is highlighted so that it’s easy to follow the flow of the conversation.

Because the firm was already running Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, it could also readily implement a unified messaging solution as part of this project. By taking

advantage of the integration between Office Communications Server 2007 voice components and Exchange Server 2007, Thompson Coburn users will receive both their e-mail messages and their voice-mail messages in their Office Outlook 2003 inbox. When they are not at their desks, users will be able to access messages by using Microsoft Office Outlook Voice Access or their handheld devices.

Thompson Coburn is integrating Office Communications Server 2007 and Office Outlook 2003 with a custom in-house customer relationship management application called Firm Contact Manager. This integration will capture telephone traffic and will present attorneys with real-time information related to each call. For example, when a client call comes in, the system automatically displays information about recent contacts and tasks related to that client. Office Communications Server 2007 also integrates with other software at the firm such as Microsoft Office SharePoint® Portal Server 2003, which Thompson Coburn plans to update soon to the 2007 edition.

On the telephony side, Thompson Coburn integrated Office Communications Server 2007 with a Cisco Unified Communications Manager (formerly called Unified Call Manager) 6.0 PBX through a Cisco 3800 Series integrated services router gateway. The firm configured Cisco Unified IP phones (models 7945G and 7965G) for its users and is testing the Jabra GN9305 headset and the Jabra GN2000 USB headset for future use.

“When we selected Cisco as our IP telephony provider, we knew that we needed someone to help us deal with the integration issues,” says Rightler. Thus in March 2008 the firm called on SKT, a systems integrator focused on unified communications. A Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, SKT is a national leader in

integrating voice, video, messaging, and collaboration.

“SKT was a one-stop shop for most of the technologies that our firm had to have,” says Michael Sulin, Manager of Infrastructure Technology at Thompson Coburn. “They were able to bring in multiple resources from multiple knowledge bases to help solve issues—they were never willing to sit back and let an issue stop the project’s forward progress. They were very responsive and are still responsive—and available—even now that their part in the project is over.”

Jonathan Shaver, Unified Communications Specialist at SKT, found the project to be rewarding. “Thompson Coburn really embraced Office Communications Server 2007 and its rich feature set, and the firm did some out-of-the-box thinking about how custom development could make it work even more powerfully for them. And for us as an integrator, having the great support and resources of Microsoft behind us has been a very positive experience.”

By August 2008, Thompson Coburn had deployed the new software in its Washington and Belleville offices and in about two-thirds of its St. Louis office. Rightler expects to finish deployment to all offices by late August and to complete the link to Firm Contact Manager in October.

Benefits

Through this new solution, Thompson Coburn has empowered its attorneys by enhancing and streamlining communication options, including the potential for video conferencing. The company has meanwhile reduced costs, improved reliability, and constructed a platform to support future increases in business value.

Increased Communication Options for Attorneys

“Our chairman likes to think of technology in very simple terms: better, faster, cheaper,” says Rightler. “So as we assessed business value, we looked at the presence features of Office Communications Server 2007.”

Explaining the value of presence awareness, Rightler says, “We use Office Communications Server 2007 to make voice, instant messaging, text, e-mail, and video available to every user for all of their contacts. With Office Communications Server 2007, each user can ask, ‘What’s the best method to contact this person right now? Am I going to waste our time?’ That’s better, faster, and cheaper.”

When attorneys are traveling—at trials or at client sites—they still have full incoming and outgoing communication options at their fingertips. “Office Communications Server 2007 shows each person’s availability. Attorneys want to be available for their clients and this solution empowers them to do that,” says Rightler.

Enhanced Video Conferencing

“The video strategy is important to us,” says Rightler. “Although we have conference centers to provide video conferencing between our offices and with external parties, we want to get more casual video going.”

Because the video component is not yet fully implemented, Thompson Coburn does not know how successful it will be. But judging from the success of instant messaging, Rightler is optimistic that attorneys will embrace the new communications technology. “I think it’s going to grow in popularity. I think we’ll increasingly see Office Communications Server 2007 used for video, by using the Microsoft RoundTable devices. It certainly is something that the attorneys have been asking us for.”

Low-Cost Solution

Although the company has added to the features that it makes available to its users, Thompson Coburn expects overall costs to decrease. "Because we're using Office Communications Server 2007 for VoIP connections, we'll no longer need our dedicated interoffice T1 land lines," Sulin says.

Rightler elaborates, "As we remove these interoffice dedicated lines, our communication costs will go down. Our telephone maintenance costs will go down. Our software costs with Microsoft will go up a little bit with Office Communications Server 2007, but in the aggregate our telephony costs will go down."

Improved Reliability

"Voice communications are critical to a law firm, so we are very cautious in our approach to voice mail, computer-to-computer voice, and phone-set voice," says Rightler. He notes that Thompson Coburn abandoned a previous VoIP project because he was not confident that the firm could maintain availability of the phone lines that are so critical to attorneys. The Office Communications Server 2007 project, however, has none of those concerns.

"In a law firm," Rightler says, "phone communications have to be reliable, dependable, and predictable. I trust Office Communications Server 2007 to deliver that reliability."

Automatic Data Collection

Although it's too early for measurable results, Rightler is perhaps most excited about the ways that Thompson Coburn can use the new communications solution to automatically collect data that will help the firm to increase revenues and profits. "Attorneys don't always have time to capture information that might be useful to them later in the course of a

project or in managing their business," he says. "In fact, our management has directed attorneys not to take too much time logging information or performing other tasks that aren't direct client service. So we believe in passive data collection wherever possible, and Office Communications Server 2007 will greatly aid us in that."

In conjunction with Firm Contact Manager, Office Communications Server 2007 will automatically collect information such as the length of a call and the tasks that are generated from it. "Just by using the system, the attorneys are creating valuable information. We think that we can use our custom programming with Office Communications Server 2007 to capture that information and make it available to the attorneys later," Rightler says. "The firm needs that information but we can't demand of our attorneys the additional time that is needed for them to grab it. By using Office Communications Server 2007 to combine our telephony and our contacts, we can create a platform that we can use to derive additional business value."

Rightler is excited about the initial integration with Firm Contact Manager. "Presenting attorneys with client information is something that we've envisioned for many years and now finally with Office Communications Server 2007 we are in a position to deploy it," he says. But he also believes that the integration will grow, enhancing both data collection and telephony. "There are all kinds of things that we probably haven't even imagined yet that will become possible through our use of Office Communications Server 2007."

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 by using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

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

For more information about Thompson Coburn LLP services, call (314) 552-6000 or visit the Web site at: www.thompsoncoburn.com

Microsoft Office System

The 2007 Microsoft Office system is the business world's chosen environment for information work, providing the programs, servers, and services that help you succeed by transforming information into impact.

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 Office Outlook 2003
 - Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal Server 2003
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007
- Technologies
 - Microsoft Office Outlook Voice Access
- Cisco Unified Communications Manager 6.0

Hardware

- Dell PowerEdge 1950 and 860 server computers
- Cisco 3800 Series integrated services router gateway
- Cisco Unified IP Phone 7945G
- Cisco Unified IP Phone 7965G
- Microsoft RoundTable

Partners

- SKT