

BALCH & BINGHAM LLP SETS A GOOD PRECEDENT WITH SHORETEL SELECTION

The law firm picked ShoreTel for its rich feature set but after Hurricane Katrina struck its Gulfport office, it was the IP telephony systems' resilience that proved its worth.

Challenge:

Balch & Bingham had six aging conventional phone systems, which made maintenance, management, and disaster recovery enormously challenging. The systems were inefficient, low-performing, and lacked resiliency. One office had a costly phone system the firm wanted to replace. Balch & Bingham struggled to deploy Cisco AVVID with minimal success.

Solution:

A lunch meeting with a ShoreTel solutions partner convinced the law firm to take a look at ShoreTel. Balch & Bingham ultimately decided to deploy ShoreTel for all of its offices. ShoreTel offered the firm important features, including unified messaging, simplified PC-based administration, and redundancy and recovery features critical in the event of a disaster.

Benefits:

The law firm got ShoreTel up and running fairly easily, while it deployed a MPLS network for guaranteed bandwidth on the WAN. It realized immediate efficiencies, including the built-in workgroup functionality, having receptionists handle calls across multiple locations, and unified messaging. The system proved its disaster recovery mettle following Hurricane Katrina, which did substantial damage to the firm's Gulfport, Miss. offices.

When the law firm Balch & Bingham decided two years ago to pull the plug on its multiple, aging circuit-switched telephony systems in favor of a single converged network, business continuity was certainly an important factor in selecting a replacement. However, the real driver for making the switch to IP telephony was the promise of improved communications efficiency and manageability.

The firm, first established in Birmingham, AL more than 80 years ago, was contending with separate telephony systems at each of its seven offices spread across three states and Washington, D.C.. None of the phone systems delivered stellar communications performance, which translated into missed calls, unhappy clients, high maintenance costs, and continuous administrative headaches.

Balch & Bingham was painfully aware that its disparate phone systems lacked the resiliency that is so critical to bring the business back online in the event of a business disruption incident. An IP telephony system with the right set of continuity and recovery capabilities is essential to a business that is absolutely dependent upon its voice communications. The firm couldn't afford to not make business continuity a priority.

"Phones are critical in a law firm," says Mark Norris, Director of IT for Balch & Bingham. "We had experienced problems with Hurricane Ivan. One office flooded, and moving the telephone system to the second floor was a major effort. We had already done quite a bit of disaster recovery planning."

SMOOTH TRANSITION

Thus, it was essential that the phone system Balch & Bingham deployed be resilient and efficient. The firm thought it had the right solution when it selected Cisco AVVID. However, weeks of struggles to pilot the Cisco AVVID system in one office prompted Norris to rethink that choice.

When one of the firm's attorneys suggested Balch & Bingham meet with a channel partner specializing in ShoreTel solutions, the firm welcomed the opportunity. A lunch meeting led to a demonstration. The results were impressive.

"The engineer had the ShoreTel system up and running in an hour," Norris says. "We had the Cisco guys in for weeks before we could get things going, and we still had a lot of dissatisfaction from our users."



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Balch & Bingham was so pleased with the ShoreTel architecture, cost structure, and capabilities that ShoreTel became the frontrunner. Norris says ShoreTel’s customer references spoke in glowing terms, so the firm decided to run a six-month trial.

The ShoreTel trial went off without a hitch, and in January 2005, Balch & Bingham began to implement the ShoreTel system in tandem with a major upgrade of its frame relay network to a MultiProtocol Label Switching (MPLS) network, which assures a high quality of service and guaranteed bandwidth. The rollout went smoothly, and the ShoreTel system delivered on its promise.

“When we turned ShoreTel on, it worked. After the Cisco experience, that was a big one,” Norris says.

A TRUE TEST

Balch & Bingham immediately realized significant benefits. The firm relies on ShoreTel’s workgroup capability, which allows it to place six attorneys and two administrative assistants in the same group. Administrative assistants can act as the workgroup administrator, setting up and transferring conference calls as well as monitoring extensions and calls in the queue from their desktops. The receptionist functions can be handled easily across locations. Users are pleased with the new phone system, tapping into capabilities such as Follow Me/Find Me and unified messaging, which allow attorneys to stay in touch and reduce the burden on their assistants to find them and retrieve important voice messages.

But it wasn’t until Hurricane Katrina took aim at the Gulf Coast that ShoreTel proved it met Balch & Bingham’s business recovery and continuity requirements. In the wake of the devastating hurricane, Balch & Bingham’s Gulfport, Mississippi office sustained considerable storm damage, and half the office’s 45 employees lost their homes. Needless to say, communications were knocked offline, but the surprise was how brief that disruption proved to be.

Their solutions provider came to the rescue, and loaned the firm two ShoreTel demo kits to quickly get the phone system up and running. BellSouth restored PRI service within days, so the firm was able to get WAN connectivity from that location. Thanks to ShoreTel’s remarkable recovery capabilities and the solution provider’s help, Balch & Bingham re-established communications services to its Gulfport office in a day, even though the facility was badly damaged and many employees were scattered over other offices and temporary locations. The firm loaded the database and routing information into a new server, and then integrated the new and existing information. The phone system works as if the Balch & Bingham employees are still sitting in their Gulfport office, when in fact they may be hundreds of miles away. “It is completely transparent to the users,” Norris says.

Norris adds that the firm has taken advantage of another ShoreTel capability during lesser weather events. Balch & Bingham used ShoreTel to show the state public utility commission and service provider when the PRI had failed after a storm. The service provider could use the ShoreTel system to troubleshoot its PRI.



That kind of insight and greater resilience has more than validated ShoreTel's value to Balch & Bingham. And when continuity is so crucial to business recovery, the ShoreTel solution helped Balch & Bingham find its footing so the firm could get back to business.



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