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CASE STUDY

Resource-Constrained Church Sings Praises of New Unified Communications System

The U.S.-based coordinating body for a major Christian denomination provides support to congregations worldwide. A couple of years ago, the organization had hundreds of employees utilizing three different phone systems, none of which fully met their needs. The organization replaced this disjointed telephony infrastructure with a single FortiVoice solution, supported by FortiFone handsets and FortiGate next-generation firewalls (NGFWs). With the assistance of Fortinet partner Dagostino Electronic Services, the religious organization implemented the new solution in less than six hours.

Today, end-users across the organization manage their own phones through user-friendly portals. IT staff are more productive because telephony takes much less of their time. Resiliency built into the system minimizes FortiVoice downtime, which maximizes employees' ability to answer calls from churches in all corners of the globe. Perhaps most important for an organization charged with wisely spending every penny received from congregants, the solution achieved a return on investment (ROI) within the first 11 months.

A Telephony "Big Mess"

The religious organization provides support services for tens of thousands of churches, serving millions of members, across almost every country around the world. Like most nonprofits, the organization faces perpetually tight technology budgets—and like workers everywhere, its staff rely on telephony to get their jobs done. Several years ago, this dichotomy had resulted in an unsustainable infrastructure.

The organization was using three phone systems. One was nearly two decades old. Executives had attempted to replace the legacy system, selecting a solution based on deep discounts and promises of features. "Unfortunately, the replacement system was already at the end of its production life when the church acquired it, which is why it was heavily discounted," says the organization's associate director of IT for networking and telecom. "It was complicated to deploy, and that system was never fully functional." The organization changed course, deciding to install an open-source private branch exchange (PBX) solution. However, that deployment also ran into snags.

About a year and a half ago, the organization had handsets talking to the free PBX, which would route calls to the partially implemented, past-end-of-life solution—which would then route certain calls to the original, ancient system. "Running three quasi-functional phone systems from three different vendors was a big mess," says the associate IT director.

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Details

Customer: Coordinating body for global religious organization

Fortinet Partner: Dagostino Electronic Services

Business Impact

- Achieved 100% return on investment (ROI) in 11 months

- Reduced staff time spent managing telephony solution by 88%

- Enables employees to better serve churches around the world with reliable voice communications

- Improves staff productivity, while adhering to tight IT budgets

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Selecting a Replacement: Features, Pricing, Integration

New management at the religious organization shifted the IT team's focus toward building a stable technology infrastructure for the long term. They put out a request for proposals (RFP) to replace all the organization's telephony hardware and software with a single solution. The organization was already considering Fortinet solutions to replace Ethernet switches and firewalls in its data center, but the state of the legacy voice infrastructure made unified communications a priority.

Quite a few companies responded to the telephony RFP. Fortinet surfaced as a leading candidate, in large part because of the attentiveness of the sales team and Fortinet partner Dagostino Electronic Services (DES). The religious organization also liked the features available in the FortiVoice platform, as well as its tight integration with other Fortinet security solutions. DES worked with the IT team to be sure the solution would meet every aspect of the organization's requirements. In addition, Fortinet was the only solution provider in the RFP process that offered the organization a live demonstration. "When DES showed us how the system works and provided a live phone system that we could test out, that spoke volumes," says the associate IT director. "It showed us that the system works and that standing it up is very easy."

The organization worked with DES to roll out the FortiVoice PBX solution and hundreds of FortiFone handsets. Together, they carefully planned implementation of a pair of PBX systems, with failover between the devices in the event of an equipment failure, and a FortiGate NGFW to protect the voice traffic.

"The deployment went very smoothly because we had everything ready to go in advance," says the associate IT director. "Within about six hours, we stood up the FortiGate and FortiVoice systems. We configured everything to bypass the pinch points in our network and routed the FortiVoice traffic where it needed to go. We displaced all three of our dysfunctional legacy systems with a single Fortinet solution, and the project came in on time and under budget. That speaks very highly of DES; they were fantastic."

Productivity Gains for IT and End Users

The resulting system provides reliable and secure voice connectivity for all the organization's employees. "Our old systems required downtime for even basic maintenance," says the associate IT director. "Because we have a high-availability pair, we can now do updates with minimal downtime. Beyond scheduled maintenance, we have not had any real issues with the phone system. It just works." That means staff now serve churches around the world with fewer interruptions.

The new Fortinet Unified Communications solution has also dramatically reduced the amount of time IT staff spend maintaining the phone system. "Previously, troubleshooting across the three phone systems took a lot of time," reports the associate IT director. "Our staff spent an average of two hours a day managing the phones. FortiVoice is much easier to use, both for day-to-day operations and setting up new users. With the single-pane-of-glass management, we spend 15 minutes a day on the phone system, at most."

In fact, ease of use is a key benefit for all the organization's users. The associate IT director cites end-users' ability to change their own settings through a web portal, as well as the attendant console that the organization's receptionists use. "This is all included in the licensing, and it all worked out of the box," he says.

Tight Budgets Soothed: ROI in Less Than a Year

The religious organization also utilizes the FortiFone Softclient to stay connected and collaborative. "We have events all over the world," says the associate IT director. "I was at an event in Jordan, and I just launched the FortiFone Softclient over a VPN [virtual private network] tunnel. It worked beautifully. I was able to make a lot of phone calls, at no cost."

Solutions

- FortiVoice
- FortiFone
- FortiGate
- FortiSwitch
- FortiAuthenticator
- FortiToken
- FortiAnalyzer

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Overall, the Fortinet solution has delivered even more value than expected. Total cost of ownership (TCO) has proven very reasonable. "The five-year maintenance, support, and service costs for the FortiVoice and FortiFone are less than we were paying for just one year of maintenance on one of the three solutions we had installed previously," reports the associate IT director. He has worked with Fortinet, in different positions, for years. "It seems to me that, as a company, Fortinet is very focused on bringing value to their customers," he says.

In fact, the Fortinet Unified Communications initiative has been so successful that the religious organization has deployed several additional Fortinet solutions. It is now using two more high-availability pairs of FortiGate NGFWs for network security—one pair to protect the network edge and one pair to serve as an internal segmentation firewall. FortiAuthenticator provides centralized authentication and SSO policy for the organization's firewalls, and FortiToken is used for strong authentication, i.e. multi-factor authentication. FortiSwitch serves as a redundant core that the firewalls connect to. Finally, the organization's IT team now use FortiAnalyzer for logging and event management across their Fortinet security infrastructure.

These further investments were justified because the Fortinet Unified Communications project paid off handsomely in a very short time. "We saw a return on investment on the Fortinet communications solution in the 11th month after deployment," says the organization's associate IT director. "Everything has really clicked, and everybody is very happy with this solution."

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