

‘Jewel of the Northwest’ makes gem of a deal on new VoIP telecom system



The challenge

The City of Bellingham was saddled with an aging system of 800 telephones to communicate with the public and internally among 15 departments in 33 different physical locations. In most cases, it was impossible to transfer calls between departments and the city was dependent on outside providers for the simplest of adds, moves or changes.

The solution

City officials hired a consultant to evaluate providers to replace their telephone system, including Avaya, Nortel, Cisco, NEC and Mitel. After several rounds of head-to-head competition, the city’s IT team selected ShoreTel in partnership with All Phase. They agreed unanimously that the ShoreTel system was simpler and easier to maintain and met the city’s complex requirements.

The benefits

ShoreTel provided an elegant, intuitive call manager desktop interface that was widely appreciated and helped improve employee productivity. Staff now had a single voice mail system, departmental and city-wide paging options and an easy way to transfer calls among departments.

The city’s emergency 911 reporting was improved and staff changes requiring adds and moves to the system can now be done quickly and easily. Best of all, operational costs and phone bills were reduced—and there’s nothing municipal administrators appreciate more than that.

Bellingham, Wash., is a thriving city of more than 75,000 people located in the northwest corner of the state. In addition to the area’s natural beauty, residents there enjoy cycling, kayaking, skiing, as well as sailing and whale watching in the nearby San Juan Islands.

With the 2010 Winter Olympics venue located just minutes away in Vancouver, Canada, the region has plans to add travel and tourism to a local economy that already boasts a mix of agriculture (orchards, dairy farms and produce), manufacturing and service industries.

All that said, the City of Bellingham in 2007 was facing the same challenges as any other municipality: Pressure on budgets, coupled with rising demand for services. Specifically, the city’s telephone system was aging—some components were more than 15 years old—and city officials needed to replace the existing system with a modern, efficient network to enhance internal communications and ensure continued delivery of constituent services to Bellingham residents.

The city’s IT team was tasked with vetting several potential telecom systems manufacturers and their service representatives, with the goal of awarding a contract to the company that best:

- Provided consistent, predictable telecommunications across all city departments
- Offered sufficient flexibility, especially for emergency services
- Delivered improved call transfer, voicemail and call display capabilities

Stepping up to the future

Overall, the city had about 800 telephones in 15 departments, housed in 33 separate locations. There were separate key telephone and voicemail systems for each department or location, making it almost impossible to transfer calls, and the dial tone had to be provided by Centrex and an expensive central office service.

The city’s IT team hired RCC Consultants to evaluate potential telecom vendors and their service reps. The contenders included Avaya, Nortel, NEC, Mitel and Cisco, as well as ShoreTel and Seattle-based All Phase.

“We had some key project goals,” said Marty Mulholland, the Bellingham’s IT Director. “We wanted technology that would be functional for the next seven to 10 years and a provider with a track record of reliability, since we have many 24-hour operations and critical public-safety responsibilities.”

In addition to completing the project on time and within budget, Mulholland noted that the provider had to deliver a solution that reduced carrier operating expenses and took advantage of the city’s fiber-optic infrastructure wherever it was cost-effective.

A head-to-head comparison

Once the consultant narrowed the potential vendors, Mulholland and her team put together a rigorous, two-stage trial to determine which system

would best meet City requirements. Several considerations quickly surfaced that favored All Phase and ShoreTel.

For example, some of the city's physical facilities had limited space, and several competitors' systems required more hardware, which strained the available space. Plus, ShoreTel offered an integrated solution in its base system for features that the City needed, precluding the need to support additional application components.



In the second stage of the selection process, the team assessed each vendor's track record. "We looked at who had the most experience serving school districts and municipalities," Mulholland said. "Quite honestly, All Phase and ShoreTel didn't have as much experience as some of the others."

But the rubber hit the road when Mulholland and her team brought in departmental representatives for a demo of the ShoreTel system. The software integration was "unique and elegant," she said, and virtually everyone who test drove the system came away excited about how intuitive and easy to use it was. Plus, All Phase was prepared to provide training for staff and managers to learn the new system.

During the demos, the ShoreTel operator was able within seconds to establish an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) group to handle large numbers of inbound calls. (With an ACD system, incoming calls are classified and can be diverted directly to queues associated with the appropriate ACD groups). That capability didn't go unnoticed.

At the end of the day, staff feedback was a key criterion in choosing ShoreTel and All Phase, Mulholland noted. "The other finalists provided solid functionality," she said, "but our people loved the ShoreTel system."

Solving a serious problem

Once the city chose ShoreTel and All Phase, however, some challenges arose. The installation and rollout for the first of the three planned phases went off without a hitch, but immediately following the second phase of the project a major technical problem was discovered—one serious enough to delay the third phase of the system by a month. The problem was partly related to a setting on the client software and partly due to a bug in the new voicemail software.

After some intense troubleshooting in partnership with the city's IT technical staff, ShoreTel engineers resolved the problem. But what mattered most to the Bellingham IT team was how hard All Phase and ShoreTel worked to identify the problem and get it fixed.

"The [situation] was quite a challenge for us," admitted Ian Stewart, the city's Telecom Analyst. "But ShoreTel stayed in active communications with us during an intense troubleshooting period, until the system was functioning properly."

All Phase worked with city personnel to develop and adjust training plans and to provide training resources for the final phase of the project, when police, library, parks and the 911 telephone systems all went live on the same day.

Now, the city has a robust, flexible VoIP telecom system that greatly improves call transfer and voicemail capabilities and provides a highly functional yet intuitive desktop call manager that staffers have come to love.

Best of all, the project came in well under budget and the city will save on its ongoing telecom carrier costs. As Mulholland noted, "That is something that city [administrators] were pleased to hear."

"When we went to (City Council) to report on the new All Phase-ShoreTel phone system, we were able to tell them the project came in on time and under budget. They were quite pleased."

Marty Mulholland

IT Director, City of Bellingham

The goals

- Improve customer service by being able to answer calls quickly and efficiently
- Provide a seamless solution for main public telephone numbers
- Reduce operating expenses for carrier services
- Improve phone-to-radio communications capabilities
- Develop predictable, easy-to-use phone numbering plan for public and internal use
- Provide unified messaging and inter-departmental communications
- Improve ADA-related communications capabilities
- Complete project with minimal disruption to city communications and services

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