

JOB SITE: VIRTUALIZATION AND TELEWORKING

ASCEND ONE CORPORATION

Empowering Employees With Technology

BY COMBINING VIRTUALIZATION AND TELEWORKING, ASCEND ONE WAS ABLE TO INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND IMPROVE THE PRODUCTIVITY AND MORALE OF ITS CALL CENTER EMPLOYEES. BY HYUN SOO PARK

JOB SITE SUMMARY

Ascend One, which is in the business of assisting consumers who are heavily burdened with debt, wanted its agents to focus on credit counseling, and not be burdened by cumbersome support and updates of local applications. So it developed a strategy to virtualize its desktop applications and run them in an application tier hosted on servers in the data center.

By enabling its call center agents to access their virtual desktops over the Web, Ascend One was able to implement teleworking strategies to broaden its business base and workforce pool, while easing the costs and time involved in commuting. Hyun Soo Park, senior director of IT, explains how they did it.



Hyun Soo Park,
senior director
of IT, Ascend One

ASCEND ONE IS IN THE BUSINESS OF ASSISTING consumers who are heavily burdened with debt. In late 2006, we began anticipating the factors that a shifting economy could throw at us and embarked on the virtualization of our contact center.

Our motivation was two-fold. First, by creating virtual desktop environments for our call center, we could ease the IT overhead required to update, support and secure an aging inventory of networked Compaq EN PCs.

Second, by enabling the call center agents to access their virtual desktops over the Web, we could implement teleworking strategies to broaden our business base and workforce pool, while easing the costs and strains of commuting.

By leveraging talented staff and innovative technology, we are able to support a nationwide virtual contact center with only three network engineers, three telecom engineers and three help desk technicians, while at the same time boosting

productivity and cutting staff attrition. Out of a total of approximately 400 representatives, roughly 300 are now working remotely.

ESTABLISHING A VIRTUAL APPLICATIONS SET

In 2000, our call center was distributed across two buildings near Baltimore. To support our workforce as economically and effectively as possible without sacrificing quality, we needed to Web-enable our support systems wherever possible.

Our infrastructure incorporates a SQL Server application tier running custom Web-enabled applications written by our developers, including CRM, accounting, and computer telephony integration (CTI) software to manage and monitor customer service calls. Our staff also uses Microsoft Internet Explorer, Outlook and Office applications.

We wanted our agents to focus on credit counseling, and not be burdened by cumbersome support and updates of local applications. So we developed a strategy to virtualize our desktop applications and run them in an application tier hosted on servers in the data center.

Instead of trying to install and manage applications on remote computers, we centrally stored and managed all applications on virtual desktops using VMware, Windows Terminal Server and Citrix. We load-balanced the virtual desktops across 21 terminal servers. The agents were then able to access their virtualized applications on virtual desktops via a Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) session.

We were then able to use Compaq EN PCs performing as browser terminals. Most of the processing burden from Visual Basic and ASP processes previously placed on each desktop was shifted to the application tier of the multitier virtual architecture.

Before virtualization, if we had a major software upgrade, we'd need to push out 600 versions to 600 desktops. By Web-enabling the applications, we were able to facilitate application deployment and support, as well as prolong the life of our inventory of aging desktops.

My next challenge was to enable virtualization of our entire contact center, first by using Terminal Services and then by upgrading to Citrix, to allow our agents to access our data-center-resident applications through a browser using their home computer. Because our CRM virtualization had made us more network-centric, we were able to implement contact center virtualization efficiently with a very manageable capital outlay. And, by relieving the credit counselors of their technology burden, we allowed them to focus on delivering better education and service to consumers.

SECURING REMOTE ACCESS TO THE NETWORK

Our next step was to ensure a secure virtual private network (VPN) connection from agents' homes to our data center. Even before we virtualized the contact center, we had provided a select group of development and support engineers with secure remote access over an IPSec VPN, facilitating round-the-clock support.

However, we didn't want our remote contact center team to have to deal with the ins and outs of network software configuration. Instead, we developed a standard configuration for a contact center desktop, which included all the software

and settings needed to access our CRM over IPSec. We then supplied Dell with a disk image of the configuration, and the vendor shipped preconfigured Dell Optiplex PCs to agents' homes—ready to run right out of the box.

Still, we'd often end up having to send an IT technician into the field to provide support for the IPSec VPN. With the growing number of remote employees, it became burdensome to support a dispersed team that way, so we contracted with Dell for on-site support.

The costs of outsourcing support motivated us to simplify our remote access even further. We began to see how clientless alternatives to IPSec VPN, such as SSL VPN, could be much easier to deploy and manage.

After evaluating a number of solutions, we deployed a SonicWALL Aventail SSL VPN. It was easy to configure, so we didn't incur extra training or consulting costs, and it supported two-factor authentication, as well as standard browsers and video conferencing. By installing a \$25,000 SSL VPN solution, we saved at least \$400,000 in hands-on support of customized, drop-shipped PCs.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As a result of virtualization and teleworking, we've seen a tangible, positive impact on our bottom line. When I started at Ascend One, our call center was one of the largest single-company facilities in Howard County, Md. Now our home office is much

smaller. Virtualization has done away with a significant portion of our facilities and operating expense.

We've seen call center agent productivity increase by 10 percent. By adding our first remote team in Portland, Ore., we immediately provided our customers with three extra hours of time-zone coverage, without the burden of extended shifts and overtime in our Maryland location. We can respond faster by finding qualified counselors who might not otherwise have been available to us and by tapping labor markets in areas that enjoy lower costs of living.

By distributing our work force nationwide, we're far less seriously impacted by regional weather conditions, and we can ensure better ongoing coverage and support for our customers. We are now extending remote access to portions of our corporate and administrative staff, and enhancing our employees' job satisfaction, as well as our business continuity and disaster recovery capabilities.

We've also seen lower agent attrition rates. Employees self-select their participation in working remotely. Participation and subsequent increases in retention have

exceeded our expectations. Employees receive higher job satisfaction from reduced expenses on meals and commuting, as well as from more flexible life/work balance. For instance, an employee who has a spouse in the military can relocate without impacting his or her ability to continue doing the job.

We use technology as a means to maintain extraordinary levels of contact with our remote employees. For instance, we use Microsoft Live Meeting for presentations and video participation, which helps to keep our remote agents engaged and connected.

Our managers are trained to support remote teams effectively. They focus on keeping remote employees connected and engaged with the entire corporate community during every stage of the employee-employer relationship. Further, we apply a high degree of contact, inclusion and feedback to make sure that all of our remote employees have an equal opportunity to participate in any company event.

We have also initiated Geo Learning to provide training for our remote team members. They can log on any time, day or night, to complete training classes, such as courses to help employees provide better customer service or cope with change.

At the same time, we have a company intranet portal that is easily accessible both onsite and remotely. It includes information such

as job aids and standard operating procedures, so people at home don't have to maintain libraries of printed documents.

We also plan to develop online help functionality, so that a counselor will be able to click an object and launch a pop-up to receive context-sensitive coaching. Using Microsoft Instant Messenger, agents in Portland can securely IM staff in Maryland as if they were down the hall. Everything that onsite agents get is also given to remote agents. To deliver it all, we rely on our virtualization architecture technology.

Technology, however, is only a means to an end. At Ascend One, we recognize that the real challenge in managing virtualization technology is in managing the people who work with it.

When I look back, I'm impressed by what we've been able to accomplish. Ultimately, the focus and investment need to be at least as much on the human factors as on the technology. ◀

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