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[Oct 23, 2000](#) Issue

Call Up The Pros

C&S Machinery just wanted voice mail. Then a savvy integrator showed the company what voice-over-IP could do.

By [David Hakala](#), Sm@rt Partner

C&S Machinery is a small company with big ambitions. But like many small businesses, its IT infrastructure wasn't keeping pace with the big guys. The 50-person firm's AT&T Partner phone system was antiquated and inadequate for C&S's growth plans. C&S acquired a second plant a few miles from its original location in 1999 and needed better communications between those locations and the rest of the world.

A voice-mail add-on was the best solution that the telephone interconnect folks offered. "I talked to several of them," says C&S VP Dominic Saratore, "and they all said that voice-over-IP technology was still too unreliable, that I was better off with their older technology." Saratore wasn't convinced.

Meanwhile, Enterprise Unified Solutions strategic accounts

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owner Mark Vande Vere was knocking on the wrong door at C&S. "It was a cold contact," he says, "and the people I was talking to said there weren't any needs at that time. Apparently, they thought the interconnect had the phone upgrade covered."

Fortunately, a CAD systems integrator who worked with C&S tipped Vande Vere to the client's communications problem and put him in touch with the right people. "Relationships like that [with other integrators] are an important source of leads for us," notes Vande Vere.

Once Vande Vere met C&S's Saratore in December 1999, the former was quick to analyze C&S's needs and offer good news.

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Call Up The Pros IP To The Rescue

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"They weren't really aware of what's available today in terms of unified messaging," recalls Vande Vere. "But part of our sales process is setting the client's expectations at an appropriate level.

"One of the first things I asked was, 'Do you need data integration at both locations?' It turned out the answer was 'yes' on several counts. First, they had a couple of NT workstations at the second plant that needed to be linked to the Microsoft Outlook system used by headquarters. Second, they had 45 shop machines at the second plant that could be networked and controlled remotely. Third, they needed in-plant paging covering both locations.

"It was apparent that they needed a pure IP solution," he summarizes. "Ergo, that meant Cisco, which in our opinion is far and away the leader in IP telephony."

Client Gets An Education

The first challenge in any "un-PBX" sale, according to Vande Vere, is explaining to the client just what IP

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telephony, unified messaging, integrated CRM, etc., mean, and how they work. The more Saratore heard, the more excited he got about the potential applications at C&S.

"They especially wanted strong autoattendant use, to make them look like a big company to callers, route calls efficiently to the correct departments and save labor," says Vande Vere. That meant a lot of call-routing mapping, workflow analysis and call-flow charting during the analysis phase of the project.

Unified messaging was another hot button with Saratore, who now reports great satisfaction with "the ability to receive my voice mail, e-mail, faxes—everything right there in one place. It's great to be able to multitask, listening to my messages in Outlook while answering e-mail."

With the initial requirements worked out, Vande Vere and one MCSE got to work in February. Naturally, some unexpected wrinkles and challenges showed up as they dug into C&S's existing network.

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"You always discover things during the implementation phase that weren't covered during the sales process," acknowledges Vande Vere.

First, he learned that the integrator of C&S's NT network had installed public IP addresses on the supposedly private network. "We had to reconfigure their entire IP address space," he recalls ruefully.

The compatibility of C&S's existing network with Cisco's IP phones was another wrinkle. "The client had 100Mbps network switches," says Vande Vere, "but the Cisco phones require 10Mbps. So we had to replace their switches with 10/100 Mbps Cisco 2912 and 2924 switches."

Vande Vere had fun with software, too. "The ActiveVoice Unity unified-messaging software we used runs under Microsoft Exchange," he explains. "But we found that C&S was using the Small Business edition of Exchange. Microsoft's technicians didn't know if Unity could be made to run on the SB edition. Eventually, we found a Microsoft tech who said, 'Oh, sure! All you need is this ...' Naturally, the

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configuration we needed was the one we had just modified," he chuckles. "That goes to show the value of good ghost backups on tape. We reinstalled the earlier configuration and got Unity running on the second try."

Connecting the paging systems so that people in one plant could page people in the other was another challenge.

"Traditional PBXes have a port for connecting to a paging system," says Vande Vere, "but there's no such port on an AVVID NT system." After some creative thinking, they plugged a PBX-to-pager conversion unit made by Valcomm into the central-office port of two 1750 Cisco routers, one at each plant. That enabled the paging systems at both plants to communicate with each other.

"No one had ever done that before," crows Vande Vere. "When I told Dominic [Saratore] that we were the only ones in the world doing this sort of thing, he really got excited."

"They have a lot of talented thinkers-outside-of-the-box people there at eUS," agrees Saratore. "My role was basically to tell them what I wanted, and they'd find a way to do it. Sometimes it took them a little time and research, but I got everything I wanted, and then some," he adds.

The most predictable snafu came when eUS tested the dual-channel ISDN connection between the plants. "Ameritech had not turned up one of the two BRI channels, so we couldn't get the router to connect," says Vande Vere. "We had to reprovision the circuit, SPID numbers, etc. It was a mess until we found one good person at Ameritech who would take ownership of the problem and get it fixed on their end."

Despite these glitches, Vande Vere and his engineer spent "only five or six days on-site" and completed the project, valued at around \$50,000, "in eight to 10 weeks."

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Although C&S paid roughly three times more for its AVVID system than it would have for a new PBX, it expects to recoup the cost within the first year of use. Saratore attributes the savings to less "overhead" and improved productivity.

"We need fewer people," he explains, including shop-machine programmers who now can control the remote plant's machines from HQ instead of traveling to and fro. "We were actually looking at expanding office space and hiring more people" to handle additional workflow, but the AVVID system has made that expense unnecessary. He says that six to 10 job slots have been either eliminated via attrition or will never need to be created.

"It's our business to go with the best technology to be more efficient than our competition," says Saratore, explaining why C&S went with a solution that many would consider overkill for such a small company. "Unified messaging enables greater productivity," he adds. "Customers are very impressed by the autoattendant, especially the caller-recognition module that lets me hear the name of who

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is calling. We've also integrated our job-shop software that runs manufacturing, accounting, etc., with the Cisco network. We're now a 60 percent paperless system."

Later this year, he plans to engage eUS again to install an 11Mbps wireless network within and between both plants. Saratore even plans to install AVVID servers, an IP phone and perhaps a wireless link at his own home. "I'll be able to work at home or the office with equal efficiency," he gloats, "and it will screen my phone calls for me, too."

Although AVVID is touted as enterprise-class technology, "it does scale down to the low end of the market," says Vande Vere. C&S Machinery "spent three times as much as they would have on a legacy phone system, yet their ROI is less than 12 months."

Working on the C&S project helped Vande Vere land another deal in a rather ironic fashion. "At the time, we were pitching another AVVID project and Cisco's own engineers were telling the client that AVVID wasn't yet ready for market," he says. "We told the client to come to Indianapolis and see it in action."

Sometimes solutions providers get a little bit ahead of their vendor partners. That's not a bad thing. After all, that's where the money is. Clockwise from top left: Tom Brush, technologist; Mark Vande Vere, strategic account owner; Doug Sauer, president and CEO; Richmond Baley, master technologist and project leader. Clockwise from top left: Tom Brush, technologist; Mark Vande Vere, strategic account owner; Doug Sauer, president and CEO; Richmond Baley, master technologist and project leader.

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