

Columbia County GA

Columbia County, GA's commissioners needed to migrate from its traditional PBX phone system to voice over IP (VoIP). With Cisco's recommendation, they turned to Logicalis for help.

Columbia County prides itself on a progressive approach to technology. A suburban county west of Augusta, as much as 60 percent of Columbia County's 108,000 residents leave the county each day to go to work. When they return, they want things to run smoothly. They have good school systems, an abundance of recreational parks and facilities, good shopping and dining choices; and they want their county government not only to serve them well but also to represent them well. A strategic commitment to appropriate technology is one of the ways the Columbia County government excels in its customer-service approach to its citizens. The commissioners understand that keeping up with technology helps the county government be more productive and enhances communications with the public it serves. It also helps to attract businesses to the area, improving the tax base, and making it possible for more of its residents to find work closer to home.

Having researched the advantages of migrating from its traditional PBX phone system to voice over IP (VoIP), the county commissioners had already moved forward with an IP Telephony system for the county government from 3Com. They weren't realizing all the benefits they knew they should be able to expect from IP Telephony, however, and they turned to a trusted vendor, Cisco Systems, for advice. Who could help them call up the future they desired?

Cisco Major Account Manager Matt Cobb recommended Logicalis. He emphasized that to be assured of a successful IPT implementation Columbia County needed not only the hardware and software products that Cisco could provide but also the high level of professional services that have made Logicalis one of Cisco's top rated partners.

Cobb arranged a meeting between Logicalis account executive John Stone, Logicalis technical consultant Charles Lan, and Columbia County IT Manager Lewis Foster and Communication Support Manager Marcy Avelar. "We liked them very much from the beginning," recalls Avelar. That was a good thing, because, over the course of the next several months, they were going to be together a lot.

Designing an IP Telephony infrastructure is a complex undertaking, especially when, for practical reasons, it involves integrating it with a 3Com system that it would eventually replace.

Experience counts

"IP Telephony design is not like building a typical local area network," says Logicalis technical consultant Lan. "IP Telephony has so many additional concerns, with trunk lines, fax machines, modems and overhead paging, you have to plan very carefully for success. That's where experience really counts."

Avelar of Columbia County had already experienced resellers who revealed that they were installing a new technology for the first time. The difference in Logicalis' approach was apparent immediately and throughout the entire implementation.

Logicalis knew how to successfully install a Cisco IP Telephony Solution. What nobody knew with certainty when they first sat down together was what the specific requirements would be to successfully install an IP Telephony solution at Columbia County within their budget and timeframe. That part of the total solution they would have to work out together.

Discovery and design

As a matter of procedure, Logicalis divides its projects into distinct pre- and post-sales phases. During the pre-sales phase the account manager and a technologist work as a team with the customer to discover their goals as well as their needs and define a solution that encompasses them.

Proceeding with characteristic diligence, the Logicalis pre-sales team of Stone and Lan worked closely with Columbia County's Avelar to design an IP Telephony infrastructure that would be affordable and scalable and could be implemented with the least amount of disruption. It took several months to develop a detailed project description that reflected everything that was learned during the discovery and design process.

"Columbia County is the best kind of customer," says Stone of Logicalis. "They challenged us to be the best we could be and they worked collaboratively with us to implement their solution. We made a great team."

Together, they counted heads; they counted phones; they counted switches and routers and fax machines. They conducted a complete existing inventory and compared it with an expanding vision of what Columbia County wanted to achieve and would expect from its new system.

There are a wide range of issues—many of them non-technical—that need to be considered when developing a total solution. Columbia County IT Manager Foster had a broad vision of what he wanted to accomplish: "It's all about customer service," he says. "We have to meet the needs of county employees so they can meet the needs of our taxpayers. That's the key."

Instead of a sales pitch, the pre-sales procedure became a learning experience that not only engaged Columbia County's IT department, but also the end-users of the new technology.

"During the design phase we provide a lot of value add," Lan says. "The customers may not be thinking about everything they are going to need or want. They haven't really been exposed to the technology yet. While they are exploring what the technology is capable of, we can recommend different options."

Avelar was impressed. "I've never worked with an organization that had such a strong pre-sales team where they actually have Cisco Certified Internetworking Experts working on pre-sales. They are extremely thorough. Anything Logicalis has quoted us has been exactly correct and very well thought out. I feel comfortable knowing that when I receive a quote from the pre-sales side, that is what we are going to be charged, and it's exactly what we're going to need."

Once the pre-sales phase was complete, Stone and Lan prepared a Statement of Work (SOW) that identified all the deliverables, including hardware, software and professional services. Then the pre-sales team handed off the SOW to the post-sales team to carry out the implementation. The division of labor in this way allows both teams to focus on what they do best. They are never far apart, however. If, for example, the post-sales engineer finds that the customer needs something that was not in the original SOW, he or she can quickly conference with the customer and the pre-sales team to determine how best to proceed.

Rave reviews

A key role in the post-sales phase is that of the project manager, who is the central point of contact during the implementation and serves as a liaison between Logicalis and the customer. That role at the Columbia County project was played to rave reviews by Lara Constantino.

"Lara held weekly status updates. She was always on top of the schedule and what was going to be happening when and where. I was impressed with the level of knowledge of all the people who came in and installed the system," Avelar adds. "We've had experience in the past with vendors who had never done what they were coming in to do. They came with configuration guides. We can install things with configuration guides, too. We expect professional services to have something that we don't. Logicalis didn't disappoint."

The full IPT implementation was divided originally into three phases. The first phase included the installation of over 400 IP phones in selected county department facilities including the Evans Government Center main campus, the Water Works Office Building, the new library and the Sheriff's office.

The Sheriff's office, which was converted from a BellSouth Centrex system required some special considerations. "The sheriff's office had gotten to the point where they had been switched and moved so much that their telco closet was horrible," Avelar says. "It was impossible to trace anything. When they moved people to different offices, they just gave them a new number. They quit moving phone numbers with people because it was too hard to do."

Not anymore. The Columbia County sheriff's office now boasts a state-of-the-art IP telephony system that positions this mission critical department for new levels of telephone functionality, including the ability to manage phone numbers digitally.

Knowledge transfer

Involving the end users in the process, understanding what their needs were at the beginning and interacting with them on a courteous and personal level throughout the implementation, contributed to the overall satisfaction of the user community. No questions were left unanswered.

"Knowledge transfer is an important part of our philosophy," says Lan. "We want users to feel empowered by their new technology, not frustrated and confused by it."

Training (on a train-the-trainer basis) was provided by Logicalis on three levels: the administrative staff who would manage the system after Logicalis completed the installation, the call center staff who would be using specific telephony applications, and the community of end users who, at least initially, just wanted to be able to place and receive phone calls so they could do their jobs.

Besides the formal training, informal training took place throughout the implementation as the Logicalis team interacted on a personal level with the Columbia County team. Logicalis has learned that when end users of a new technology get to know, respect and like the people involved in delivering the technology, the changes the new technology represents in their lives seems less daunting, and their level of satisfaction increases dramatically. Knowing that there was some anxiety among the staff in the sheriff's office about the differences between the old phones and the new ones, for example, the Logicalis installers kept both sets of phones on the desk during the transition. As a result, the good feeling that existed between Logicalis delivery consultants Geoff Watkins and Pard Mahatthanatrakul transferred directly to the technology they delivered.

Ongoing relationship

"All in all, it was a great relationship," summarizes Avelar. "We worked side by side with County workers throughout the whole project. We didn't want to have someone come in, install it, say, 'Okay, it's done,' and leave. We wanted to be very involved every step of the way."

The first phase of the implementation was completed in March and Columbia County is so pleased with the result that it is now considering combining the next two phases into one. The total project will provide the county a comprehensive foundation from which it can grow into the increased functionality that the convergence of voice and data through IP Telephony makes possible.

Wherever the new technology allows them to go, the relationship between Logicalis and Columbia County is long term. "Logicalis exceeded my expectations throughout the whole project," Avelar says. "We will definitely use Logicalis for anything we do going forward."

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Marcy Avelar, Communication Support Manager, Columbia County GA