

TEXANS SCORE WITH MAJOR TECH PLAY

Premier network services are critical to the Houston Texans, says Vice President of IT Jeff Schmitz. "How we communicate with our customers is a big part of our business."

Houston's NFL franchise bolsters business and football operations through consolidated network services and Voice over IP.

At a Glance

ORGANIZATION: Houston Texans and the McNair Group

HEADQUARTERS: Houston

EMPLOYEES: 150 with the Texans; 30 with the McNair Group

I.T. STAFF: 7

DESCRIPTION: The Houston Texans joined the NFL in 2002, becoming the league's 32nd franchise. The team, which plays its home games at NRG Stadium, is a two-time AFC South champion. Robert McNair, CEO of the McNair Group, a financial and real estate firm, owns the Texans.



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"It absolutely gives us a reliable phone system with the added benefits of instant messaging, accessing voicemail in email and call clarity."

— Jeff Schmitz, Vice President of IT

Fans of the Houston Texans are seriously loyal: The team has sold out 122 straight games. Two back-to-back division championships (in 2011 and 2012) certainly help, but the team also attributes its fans' loyalty to customer service — built on the back of a dynamic network and unified communications infrastructure rolled out over past few years.

"From a business operations standpoint, we're definitely centered around unified communications," says Jeff Schmitz, the team's vice president of IT. "How we communicate with our customers is a big part of our business."

When the Houston Texans joined the National Football League as an expansion team in 2002, the team had to build its fan base and attract corporate sponsors from scratch. The franchise also needed to develop a technology strategy that would allow it to keep both groups satisfied over the long haul. "From the start, we've really catered to the needs of our season ticket holders and sponsors," Schmitz says.

Ticket sales reps, for instance, rely on call center technology to help fans and business sponsors choose or upgrade their seats or luxury suites. And, on gameday, customer service reps staff a hotline to handle questions and requests.

Although the Texans have had ups and downs on the football field, top-notch customer service remains a constant and helps keep fan loyalty strong, Schmitz says.

For its part in keeping fans happy, the tech team for the Texans began a campaign in 2010 to overhaul the organization's existing network to support major UC services across team offices.

During the first part of this effort, the IT department upgraded the Texans network with new Cisco Systems networking gear. Then, for the second phase that began in 2012, the IT staff replaced an aging Voice over IP phone system with a new Cisco VoIP system and call center services to provide high-quality voice capabilities along with other new features.

This new infrastructure — installed at NRG Stadium and at the headquarters of the McNair Group, the financial and real estate firm of team owner Robert McNair — provides employees with many UC capabilities, including video calls, instant messaging and

the ability to send office calls to mobile phones.

The UC infrastructure supports customer service needs and lets employees from business and football operations communicate and collaborate effectively, boosting productivity, Schmitz says. It is also much easier to manage, resulting in time and cost savings for the IT team.

Into the Red Zone

In late 2010, working with CDW, the Houston Texans began the first phase of their network overhaul. CDW engineers replaced one core switch with two Cisco Catalyst 6504-E switches. With this upgrade, the network gained redundancy and network backbone speeds jumped from 1 gigabit per second to 10Gbps. The project also included an upgrade at the network edge: Four new Cisco Catalyst 4506-E Series switches and eight new Cisco Catalyst 3750X Series switches were installed at NRG Stadium and the team's nearby practice field. The CDW and Texans IT teams also installed Cisco Catalyst 3570X Series and Cisco Catalyst 4507-E Series switches at the McNair Group headquarters.

The more robust network not only ensures good voice

quality for the VoIP and UC services, but it also improves application performance, supports wireless access and speeds video distribution throughout the stadium, Schmitz says.

On gameday, for example, the video production department replays prepackaged video segments and feeds live footage to the stadium's video-board network. Then, after games, players and coaches access game film from the video staff wirelessly on their iPad devices.

"We've been pushing a lot more video, but our need for bandwidth is also application-driven as we implement customer relationship management software and upgrades to the accounting system," Schmitz says.

Once the network revamp was complete, the switch to a new phone system became absolutely necessary, Schmitz says, recalling that by 2012, the existing phone system suffered frequent (though controlled) outages.

Also, because the system lacked redundancy, the McNair Group offices suffered occasional downtime of phone and voicemail service when the network connection to NRG Stadium was interrupted.

The UC Kickoff

Because CDW had successfully implemented the team's retooled network backbone in 2010, Schmitz turned again to the company's solution architects and engineers when it came time to design and install the new Cisco UC system and VoIP service two years later.

The design includes Cisco UC Manager to handle call processing, Cisco Contact Center Express to run the team's call center and Cisco Unity Connection for unified messaging service.

Five CDW engineers helped the Texans install the new VoIP phone system and UC call center over a six-week period, with a tight late-August deadline that took into account the team's first regular-season game that year. The joint CDW-Texans team deployed the UC software on a Cisco UCS C-Series

Texans Set Tablet Defense Formation

The Houston Texans deployed AirWatch Mobile Device Management to secure and manage the team's fleet of 130 iPad devices.

The IT department considered several options, but AirWatch (now owned by VMware), was the easiest MDM tool to use and provides the features the team needs, says Jeff Schmitz, the Texans' vice president of IT.

Schmitz, who installed the software on-premises, turned off access to the App Store and web browsing. Players can connect only to a Wi-Fi network and study the playbook, watch game video and (through the team's playbook app) message teammates and coaches.

Because AirWatch makes it possible for the IT department to remotely erase data if a player loses his iPad, team devices are readily protected from prying eyes, Schmitz says. The team layers on security further with two-factor authentication.

server, equipped each employee with a video-screen IP phone and installed IP conference phones in meeting rooms.

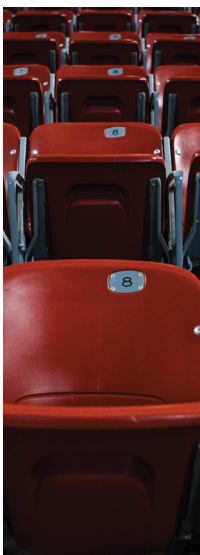
"We worked around the clock," Schmitz says. "CDW did a great job to make sure we made our go-live date. They absolutely nailed it."

CDW created the architecture design for the new phone system and network to ensure uptime and quality of service, says CDW Solution Architect Jodie Watt. The installation team also deployed a backup UC system on a second Cisco UCS server at the McNair Group offices. Now, if the main phone system goes down for any reason, it fails over automatically to the backup so both locations always have a dial tone.

"We have redundant applications spread across two sites that are connected by a wide area network with quality of service features enabled," Watt says.

For voice quality and to secure data traffic, the CDW engineers implemented policy-based routing between the stadium and the McNair Group offices. "We are better able to integrate with our remote office and keep voice traffic separate from the data side," Schmitz says.

Additionally, CDW's engineers used the UC upgrade to allow the free flow of calls and instant messages between the Texans' offices and the McNair Group's offices, which previously had separate Active Directory servers. Kris Shirley, a senior Cisco UC consultant with CDW, says he implemented Active Directory Lightweight Directory



1,400 to 1,500

Typical number of daily calls to the Houston Texans call center in the week leading up to the deadline for season ticket renewals

X's and O's: A Data Center Redesigned

Before the Houston Texans tech team could upgrade the franchise's network and Voice over IP system, the team's IT department needed to prepare its data center and upgrade power and cooling equipment.

In the summer of 2010, the team faced two dilemmas: It needed to incorporate servers and a storage area network providing National Football League services into its data center, while increasing its own server count for future growth. The additions would have pushed the data center beyond its current cooling capabilities, says Jeff Schmitz, the Texans' vice president of IT.

At the same time, the team's facilities also faced occasional brownouts. When those occurred, the existing uninterruptible power systems (UPS) would sometimes fail, causing servers to shut down.

"Some of the UPS units weren't made for the environment," Schmitz says.

The IT department addressed these problems by purchasing an APC Symmetra PX UPS and four new APC air conditioning units. Also, based on CDW's advice, the IT staff redesigned the data center, implementing a hot aisle/cold aisle layout to improve airflow and reduce cooling needs.

Services to synchronize the two directories into a single centralized repository.

Aiming for the End Zone

When the new phone system went live, employees loved it. Compared with the old system, "the sound quality is completely night and day," Schmitz says.

Using IP phones, the team's coaches now regularly make video calls to one another. For business operations, employees from accounting to marketing use Cisco Jabber. The application lets employees launch all the UC services (instant messaging, and voice and video calls) and to check voicemail. It also uses presence so that an employee can see if another employee is available and then easily move from an IM exchange with one user to a video conference with several, for instance.

Likewise, the system's call forwarding and unified messaging have improved customer service. On gameday,

customer service staffers can forward calls from their desk phones to their smartphones when roaming the stadium, which means there's no interruption in the services they provide to fans, says John Schriever, senior vice president of ticketing and event services.

The corporate development team benefits in the same way. They prefer face-to-face meetings with sponsors at the stadium; however, if sponsors call with a need, team members can respond quickly by using call forwarding and the ability to retrieve their work voicemail on their smartphones, Schmitz adds.

The Texans have 30 call center employees. Some agents handle ticket sales; others manage luxury suite sales; and a third group tackles customer service needs.

"We have 19,000 season ticket accounts, and they are going to need help from time to time," Schriever says. "People may prefer to talk to a person as opposed to handling a transaction online or sending an email."

The new Cisco call center software also makes it possible for the team to plan for and manage call volume. If the team is selling playoff tickets and the call center is bombarded with queries, customer service agents can log in to help with ticket sales, Schriever says. "People jump in and help during peak demand," he says. This wasn't an option with the team's old call center technology.

Plus, managers now can track employee productivity as well and help advise the sales teams, he says. The Texans senior staff has access to reporting that details the number and length of calls the team's sales reps make, for example.

Moving forward, the Texans' IT department plans to upgrade to the latest version of Cisco UC and equip employees with a Jabber app for their smartphones to further improve communications for employees on the go.

Overall, the new network and UC system have definitely been worth the investment, Schmitz says. Increased uptime, better voice quality and improved communications are clear benefits. "It absolutely gives us a reliable phone system with the added benefits of instant messaging, accessing voicemail in email and call clarity," he says.



Learn how another sports team, the Houston Rockets, overhauled its network infrastructure in record time at CDW.com/Rockets.



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