



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

ePLUS USES INTEGRATED SERVICES PLATFORM TO BUILD MORE EFFICIENT, UNIFIED COMPANY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CUSTOMER NAME

ePlus®, Inc.

INDUSTRY

Financial solutions and enterprise software

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

- Unify a dispersed nationwide workforce
- Reduce costs
- Enable more rapid expansion

NETWORK SOLUTION

- Dynamic Multipoint VPN (DMVPN) WAN and companywide IP Communications, both supported by Cisco integrated services routers at branch offices

BUSINESS VALUE

- Created a more unified and connected company
- Reduced WAN and phone system costs
- Enabled faster expansion

Financial solutions and enterprise software company ePlus uses Cisco Systems integrated services routers to provide both VPN connectivity and IP voice services to branch offices nationwide. The solution enables a more unified companywide workforce, while reducing WAN and phone maintenance costs and fostering more rapid growth.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

ePlus, Inc. (NASD NM: PLUS) is a leading provider of enterprise software and financial solutions for enterprise and midmarket customers, including cost management, supply chain management, and procurement management. Headquartered in Herndon, Virginia, the company maintains more than 30 locations across the United States and serves more than 2000 customers.

ePlus serves a wide variety of organizations in both the public and private sectors, including the Fortune 500, Healthcare, Federal Government, State and Local Government, K-12 and Higher Education, as well as many other vertical markets. With over a decade on the leading edge of enterprise software and financial solutions, ePlus has built a foundation of excellence through experience and acquired the vision and resources to deliver the right solution for every business objective.

ePlus expanded rapidly throughout the 1990s, primarily by acquiring other companies in new markets. While the strategy enabled rapid growth, it also created integration issues for the company culture and its technology and communications systems.

“We ended up having 35 offices with 35 different vendors’ equipment, 35 different Internet providers and many different phone systems,” says Chris Fairbanks, principal network architect for ePlus. “Maintenance and reliability were big problems and we found that our costs were out of control.”

Phone system costs were a particular challenge. Each new site had its own proprietary private branch exchange (PBX) phone system and ePlus had to use costly outside vendors for all maintenance and support. Keeping track of the vendors was an enormous job and a simple move, add, or change of an office phone could take days to complete. The cost of long-distance calls between offices was also substantial.

The complex, inefficient communications infrastructure was also affecting employee productivity. Software developers at offices around the country needed to collaborate closely to develop and deliver new solutions and updates, while account managers and sales staff needed to be in constant contact with each other. Without a centralized dial plan however, each time employees needed to reach someone they had to figure out where that employee was based, look up the 10-digit phone number on a company directory and hope that the information was current.

Most importantly, as the company continued to expand, the inefficiencies of the network and communications infrastructure threatened to impede future growth and time to revenue.

“Time is money,” says Fairbanks. “If it takes us six months to integrate a new acquisition, that’s lost time and revenue. We need to get any company we acquire in the loop and up to speed on our products and services as soon as possible. If they’re disconnected, if they don’t have the same phone system, or can’t access the same applications because the network can’t provide it, then we’re in trouble. We specialize in technology and if we can’t react quickly to market changes, our competitors are going to beat us.”

“The Cisco integrated services routers allow us to centralize everything into one router. By the time we have completed our deployment, we will have doubled the size of our organization, while reducing maintenance and circuit costs. In addition, our IT staff workload will be significantly reduced.”

—Chris Fairbanks, Principal Network Architect, ePlus, Inc.

NETWORK SOLUTION

As part of an extensive effort to create a more unified company, ePlus began exploring options for upgrading its IT infrastructure. The IT team wanted to reduce costs, streamline network operations, and improve communications between employees nationwide. They determined that the best solution was to migrate the company’s WAN to a single Dynamic Multipoint VPN (DMVPN) backbone and switch the telephone services at all offices over to a unified, network-based IP communications system. After exploring several options, Fairbanks and his team decided that integrated services routers from Cisco Systems® offered the easiest, most cost-effective solution for making the company’s vision a reality.

“The company was looking at doing this several different ways when I was brought in, but I felt we needed to look at what Cisco® had to offer first,” says Fairbanks. “I had a lot of experience with Cisco voice and data solutions in the past and I had a lot of confidence in them.”

In June 2003, Fairbanks’ team began upgrading branch offices with Cisco 2600 Series and Cisco 3700 Series multiservice routers to support a new, centralized voice solution and connect with the DMVPN WAN. As the migration progressed, ePlus began using Cisco 2800 Series and 3800 Series integrated services routers to deliver even higher performance and build in more headroom for future growth.

Today, the older generation of Cisco multiservice routers support VPN connectivity and voice services at many ePlus offices. As the company continues to replace older routers with new-generation Cisco integrated services routers, ePlus will also be able to deliver concurrently videoconferencing, content-caching, intrusion-prevention, and Network Admission Control (NAC) services with the new integrated services routers, with no degradation in performance.

To support companywide voice services, the Cisco branch office routers connect each employee’s Cisco IP Phone with a centralized Cisco CallManager server at the company’s data center in Virginia. The Cisco IP Communications solution provides IP call processing, a four-digit dial plan for the entire company, and network-based voice-mail and fax services. The Cisco routers at ePlus branch offices provide Survivable Remote Site Telephony (SRST) services to ensure that employee phones can continue to function, even if the WAN connection were to go down. The company also deployed Cisco Unity®—a unified messaging solution that delivers e-mail and voice mail to a single manageable inbox, allowing employees to retrieve messages in whatever format is most convenient at a given time, and respond more rapidly to customers and coworkers.

To protect the network from security threats, ePlus uses Cisco PIX® Firewalls and Cisco network intrusion detection system (NIDS) sensors in the Virginia data center. All ePlus servers were also equipped with Cisco Security Agent (CSA), a software-based solution that identifies and responds to any malicious operating system behavior, protecting against both known and unknown viruses and worms. To manage all the security systems in the network, ePlus uses a Protego Networks MARS threat mitigation appliance. To support teleworkers, Cisco VPN concentrators provide secure remote connectivity to network services from virtually anywhere.

BUSINESS VALUE

All of ePlus' branch offices are now using Cisco access routers, and the company is already realizing impressive results. Instead of each office having a unique, costly Frame Relay or private-line WAN connection, all sites use Cisco routers to connect to a unified DMVPN WAN that supports both data and voice services.

"At some of our sites, we were spending almost \$3000 a month for the circuits," says Fairbanks. "Now, we're saving as much as \$2000 a month per site just on WAN connectivity costs alone, not including all the other advantages we get with four-digit dialing between offices, least-cost routing and toll bypass."

ePlus is also enjoying substantial savings on phone-system maintenance and support costs thanks to the Cisco IP Communications solution. Instead of bringing in costly outside vendors, IT administrators can handle basic maintenance themselves, including moves, adds, and changes in just a few seconds. The ability to converge multiple services onto a single branch office platform has also helped streamline operations by reducing the number of devices that need to be managed at each branch.

"The Cisco integrated services routers allow us to centralize everything into one router," says Fairbanks. "By the time we have completed our deployment, we will have doubled the size of our organization, while reducing maintenance and circuit costs. In addition, our IT staff workload will be significantly reduced."

Unifying the Company

Today, ePlus is more closely connected than ever before. Employees can reach any coworker across the country with a four-digit extension. ePlus developers even created a simple Extensible Markup Language (XML) application that integrates the IP voice solution with the company's Active Directory system. Employees can search by name, office, or company right from the screen on their Cisco IP phones and locate coworkers instantly.

"Before, even though we were all under the ePlus name, we were completely different offices, almost different companies," says Fairbanks. "Today, our offices can work much more closely with each other, share resources, and more easily find the information they need to serve our customers. It's helped us to feel like one company."

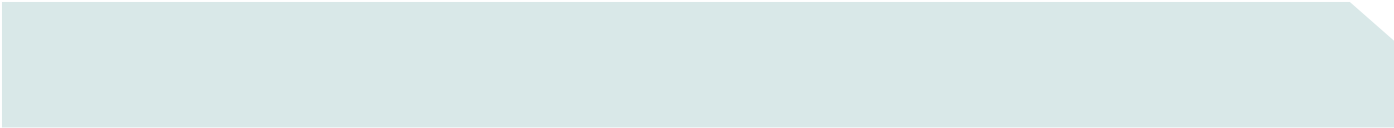
As ePlus continues to expand and acquire new companies, the organization can now quickly and easily bring new offices into the fold. When a new site needs to be added, Fairbanks' staff can preconfigure an Integrated Services Router and ship it to the office, and have services fully up and running in less than a day.

"The integrated services routers gives us a cookie-cutter solution," says Fairbanks. "When we bring up a new site, all we need to do is turn up a local phone line and we can have the dial plan configured within 20 minutes. Then it's just a matter of plugging the phones in. For most of our sites, the whole phone system is up in two hours."

NEXT STEPS

As ePlus continues to grow, Fairbanks plans to continue expanding the services delivered by the Cisco branch office routers. In the coming year, he plans to deploy the Cisco IOS® Intrusion Prevention System (IPS) on all access routers to help secure local information assets at branch offices and deploy a Cisco MeetingPlace conferencing solution, which should pay for itself within six months.

Integrated services routers at new sites will also be outfitted with integrated Cisco content networking modules to provide content filtering, caching, and pre-positioning of antivirus and operating system patches for branch office employees. Fairbanks is also rolling out NAC and 802.1x-port authentication services at local branches. All of these services will be embedded within the Cisco integrated services routers.



“We’ve been able to roll out our core services and we still have slots available on the routers,” says Fairbanks. “We can roll out all the additional services we want and we’ll still have room to grow.”

To better support employees who spend a great deal of time traveling or working from home, Fairbanks is also planning to expand the existing Cisco teleworker solution. Employees will be outfitted with Cisco 800 Series routers and Cisco IP phones in their home offices, providing teleworkers with secure VPN connectivity to the full range of ePlus’ data, telephony, and collaboration applications at home. ePlus is also piloting Cisco IP Communicator, a software-based application that delivers enhanced telephony support through the PC that will help enable employees to access the same telephone interface and features on their laptops as they would see on a Cisco IP Phone. Ultimately, employees will have access to all company applications and communications tools—including four-digit dialing and toll bypass—from virtually anywhere they need it.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cisco Systems has already helped financial services organizations worldwide reduce costs and streamline operations by converging branch office services. To find out how Cisco can help your organization, contact your local account representative, or visit:

<http://www.cisco.com/go/isr> and <http://www.cisco.com/go/ipc>.

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