



School District Improves Communication, Sees Cost Savings with Unified Messaging

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Education

Customer Profile

Tracy Unified School District, an educational system in northern California, operates 19 schools for students from kindergarten through high school.

Business Situation

District teachers, administrators, and students use e-mail, voice mail, instant messaging, and faxes to communicate. The district needed a more cost-effective infrastructure to support these needs.

Solution

Using Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007, the district created a unified messaging solution with improved communication and management features.

Benefits

- Improved communication
- Cost savings
- Increased productivity
- More efficient administration
- Better security

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Cindy Minter, Director of Information Services and Educational Technology, Tracy Unified School District

The large Tracy Unified School District serves the needs of 16,500 students in Tracy, a city in northern California. The district’s 1,500 employees rely on e-mail, voice mail, instant messaging, and faxes to communicate with each other, vendors, and parents. However, the district had been looking for a more cost-effective infrastructure to support these communication methods. Specifically, it wanted a messaging solution that would eliminate high-cost phone lines while providing users with more flexible ways to communicate. In October 2006, the district deployed a prerelease version of Microsoft® Exchange Server 2007 with unified messaging capabilities. As a result, the district’s office has experienced better communication and more efficient management. In addition, it expects to save in excess of U.S.\$350,000 and experience improved security once full deployment is achieved.



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Situation

Tracy Unified School District comprises two high schools, one alternative high school, one community school, two middle schools, five kindergarten-through-eighth-grade schools, and eight elementary schools. With such a large education system, communication plays an integral role in the district. For example, e-mail is a critical tool for internal communication among staff and external communication with vendors, other schools, and parents. District staff members also use instant messaging to communicate. At schools that have voice mail, it is used, in addition to e-mail, for leaving messages after hours.

Messaging applications are used by all staff members, from the school-site clerks and custodians to the superintendent of schools. In addition, the majority of students rely on messaging technology to communicate with teachers and with each other. “Our employees and students absolutely need and depend on e-mail and voice mail access,” says Cindy Minter, Director of Information Services and Educational Technology, Tracy Unified School District. Minter manages the district’s IT services, which include hosted e-mail services based on Microsoft® Exchange Server 2003, Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2005, and a range of voice mail systems at various school sites.

In early 2005, the district began looking at its overall messaging infrastructure, in part because its ten-year prepaid phone contract with an outside vendor was due to expire at the end of 2006. At that time, the district would begin paying U.S.\$30 per month per phone line—an annual cost of more than \$200,000. “We really wanted to make voice mail available to all employees,” says Minter. “Our voice mail system was limited and outdated.” She explains that the district also had a limited Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) deployed. VoIP is a calling system that

directs phone calls over the Internet. “However, we wanted to expand that to replace the high-cost phone lines,” she says.

During the district’s research into various VoIP solutions and providers, it learned that Microsoft was developing a unified messaging component in its upcoming Exchange Server 2007 communication and collaboration server. “Exchange Server had been our core messaging software since 1999,” explains Sara Windsor, Senior Network Engineer. “It seemed like a natural fit for us to upgrade to this newest version. After additional research, we realized we could deliver it to all users in the district through our existing Exchange Server infrastructure. At the same time, we could save money by phasing out most of our phone lines.”

From a technical perspective, Windsor says the district was seeking a messaging solution that would integrate well with its existing infrastructure based on the Active Directory® directory service. Additionally, the district wanted a solution that could scale to include all school sites and staffs and provide Web-based e-mail for students. “We also needed the solution to be one that could be deployed in a phased approach, one school at a time, while maintaining seamless interoperability with our existing Exchange Server 2003 infrastructure,” says Windsor.

Solution

After looking at several messaging environments, Tracy Unified School District chose to implement Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, because it met all of the district’s messaging needs, integrated seamlessly with Active Directory and Exchange Server 2003, and allowed the district to offer its staff the added value of unified messaging at no additional cost. “We also decided on Exchange Server 2007 because its enhanced capabilities and

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excellent scalability offered us the opportunity to integrate faxing as well as mobile messaging in the future,” says Minter.

In September 2006, the district deployed the prerelease version of Exchange Server 2007, with the help of technology partners Microsoft Services and the VIA Group. The VIA Group specifically helped the district with the unified messaging component of the Exchange Server 2007 implementation, integrating the unified messaging server with the district’s Cisco® Unified Communications Manager 5.0 IP private branch exchange phone system. “VIA was an outstanding partner, and the company’s specific expertise in configuring Exchange Server 2007 unified messaging in conjunction with the Cisco Unified Communications Manager solution was a key component of our success,” says Windsor.

The district’s new unified messaging server provides a way for data from the district’s phones to enter the Exchange Server 2007 infrastructure. The Microsoft Exchange Server mailbox server then stores voice mail and fax messages on its own, as opposed to needing separate systems for these tasks.

The unified messaging server also provides a Speech-Enabled Automated Attendant, which answers calls via an automated operator and global address list directory services. Callers use this feature through touch tone menus or speech recognition, using their own voice. In addition, the unified messaging server’s ability to convert text to speech enables callers to have e-mail, calendar, personal contacts, and other information read to them.

In October 2006, the district began migrating staff and student mailboxes to the unified messaging solution. During that time, the district also migrated its technology department from the previous voice mail solution to the new solution. Currently, there are 270 mailboxes operating on Exchange

Server 2007, along with 50 unified messaging users. When the full deployment is completed in early 2007, the district will have between 2,000 and 5,000 mailboxes per server, with six servers total running on Exchange Server 2007.

Benefits

Employees in the Tracy Unified School District have experienced improved communication abilities with Exchange Server 2007. The district also projects that it will save hundreds of thousands of dollars by using the unified messaging capabilities of the product. In addition, the district expects to increase staff productivity, provide more efficient administration, and improve security.

Improved Communication

District employees can now receive voice mail messages in their Exchange Server Inboxes and create flexible Automated Attendants for various business needs. This enables faster, more flexible communications.

“The anytime, anywhere access to voice mail provides a tremendous productivity benefit for our users because of the added flexibility,” says Minter. “They’re no longer tied to their on-site phones for voice mail. Staff members can read e-mail messages and listen to voice mail within Microsoft Office Outlook®, or listen to e-mail over the phone. It’s much more flexible.”

District employees can also take advantage of an enhanced version of Outlook Web Access (OWA), which now more closely matches the user interface of the Microsoft Office Outlook 2007 messaging and collaboration client much more closely. Employees find the enhanced OWA easy to use because of its better calendaring and information storage capabilities and its ability to schedule out-of-office messages to start and finish on specific dates or times. As a result, staff members can more easily juggle

multiple parent-teacher conferences and meetings. "This richer Outlook Web Access experience is a big advantage to both staff and students," says Windsor. "Most of our staff and thousands of students are OWA users. They can do much more now and communicate better as a result."

Cost Savings

Tracy Unified School District will eventually deploy its new communication solution to 1,200 staff members. According to Minter, that will save the district \$168,000 in funding previously earmarked for unified messaging services. Minter also says that implementation of VoIP throughout the district for existing phone lines and replacing limited or no voice mail in the previous setup with Exchange Server Unified Messaging will enable the district to save another \$200,000 per year. "Replacing most phone lines with a VoIP solution is a huge cost savings for us," she says.

Increased Productivity

The ability of district staff members to access Exchange Server 2007 from the office, home, or anywhere else has also helped boost productivity. "Trying to reach people by phone has always been a business challenge here," says Minter. "Now, I can still get voice mail messages even when I'm far from my phone. Our users are very excited about no longer needing to be near their phones for messages. This is especially valuable for teachers that put in long work days in the classroom and often had to spend additional time at school to retrieve voice mail messages left by parents."

More Efficient Administration

Windsor finds managing and administering the messaging infrastructure more efficient with Exchange Server 2007. For example, the Exchange Server Best Practices Analyzer Tool has proven to be an asset for Windsor in terms of managing the district's Exchange

Server environment. "We have a small staff here that has to do a lot, and we also have limited funding for more support resources," says Windsor. "The Best Practices Analyzer Tool has brought misconfigurations and potential problems to my attention long before they turned into severe problems. This has allowed me to be proactive and more efficient."

Cached Exchange Mode in Outlook has also given district users the ability to have a consistent Outlook experience during times of network congestion. "They can use this mode to compose e-mail messages offline and send them when they connect to the network," says Windsor. "That eases our management burden during those times."

Better Security

Tracy Unified School District also plans to implement the Microsoft Exchange Server Edge Transport server to better protect the district from viruses and spam. According to Windsor, that will enable the district to experience much better security overall. "On average, we receive about 27,000 e-mail messages per day, of which only around 10 percent are legitimate," says Windsor. "Aside from the time it used to take users to sort through unwanted messages and delete them, I spent a lot of my own administrative time responding to these issues. The ability to add the Edge Transport server as another layer in protecting my users from spam is a big advantage of Exchange Server 2007."

Specifically, the Edge Transport server will enable antivirus scanning at the edge of the district's Exchange Server environment, before messages enter internal servers. "The attachment-filtering capabilities of the Edge Transport server offer a powerful tool to help us eliminate the transfer of potentially offensive or dangerous file types," she says. "This will ultimately help me and our users

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experience better security while becoming more productive.”

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