



Unified Communications Partner Helps Telecom Partner to Expand Revenue Streams

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Professional services—
IT services

Customer Profile

The VIA Group, a Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner based in Houston, Texas, offers services to help enterprise customers evaluate, deploy, and support unified communications solutions.

Business Situation

Artium, a leading European telecoms software developer, needed to gain the expertise to add unified communications to its offerings for both fixed and mobile network operator customers.

Solution

Artium engaged The VIA Group to help it develop the architecture for hosted solutions based on Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging and Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007.

Benefits

- Higher revenue services
- Shortened learning curve
- Enhanced connectivity
- Streamlined collaboration
- Improved customer service

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Christian Frederiksen, Business Development Director, Artium

With more than 17 years designing innovative real-time and non-real-time communications solutions, Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner The VIA Group is well equipped to help IT and telephony teams navigate the complexities of developing unified communications solutions. Within six months of engaging The VIA Group, Artium—also a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and a European telecoms software developer—had developed a proof of concept for Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging and Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007. Artium credits its engagement with The VIA Group with shortening its time-to-market and helping it discover new revenue sources. These capabilities have also helped support more productive connectivity and collaboration and more efficient customer support.



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Simon Wood, Vice President of Program Management, Artilium

Situation

As the line between telephones and computers becomes less distinct, more companies are looking for ways to take advantage of the unification of voice and data networks. The traditional separation between the two types of technology makes it very important for telecom solution providers to understand the complexities of unified communications solutions. To help reduce risk, many companies turn to a partner that has in-depth knowledge of both voice and data communications and broad experience with integrating them into productive applications.

The VIA Group, a Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner based in Houston, Texas, is uniquely suited to meet that challenge. With Advanced Infrastructure and Networking Infrastructure Solutions Competencies, The VIA Group has been delivering converged solutions for customers of all sizes since 1990. “We consider ourselves to be a truly converged partner in the data and voice world because we know how to speak the data language with the IT folks and how to speak telephony with the telephony folks,” says Jeff Goodwin, Senior Technologist for The VIA Group.

The VIA Group serves primarily enterprise customers ranging from 500 to 350,000 employees. The firm provides consulting services to guide companies’ IT and telephony teams through the process of implementing unified communications solutions that bridge the gap between the telephone and the computer to deliver real-time messaging, voice, and conferencing to workstations. The VIA Group works with senior management teams to expedite evaluation of new technologies and to develop plans for incorporating those technologies into a company’s infrastructure. It also provides insight and training to guide IT and telephony staff through integrating

voice and messaging solutions into their existing environments.

In early 2007, Artilium, a telecoms software developer that provides mobile operators with solutions that take advantage of the convergence of IT, Web, and telecom networks, was looking to expand its services to include unified communications solutions. The company has 54 employees, and in addition to its headquarters in Bruges, Belgium, has offices in London and Dunfermline in the United Kingdom, and in Seattle, Washington. A Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, Artilium has earned ISV/Software and Networking Infrastructure Solutions Competencies. Its Artilium Real-Time Architecture (ARTA) Mobile Services Framework delivers real-time controls and intelligence that make it possible for fixed and mobile network operators to manage communications across networks and to easily deploy and monetize differentiated services for their subscribers. Artilium wanted to expand its services to help operators respond to the challenges of the growing industry trend toward charging flat rates for voice and data transmission.

“Just a few years ago, international voice calls were very expensive,” says Simon Wood, Vice President of Program Management at Artilium. “Now, there’s not a significant price difference between me speaking from my mobile phone in the U.K. to someone in the United States or to someone just down the road.”

Those dropping prices made it challenging for network operators to maintain revenue levels. “Within this environment, network operators are looking for higher value, intuitive, and compelling services that they can offer to their subscribers to justify extra charges. In so doing, they can deliver more benefits to users and maintain their revenue levels,” says Wood.

Artium wanted to offer its network operator customers unified communications solutions to expedite their ability to gain a competitive advantage over new market players such as cable companies. To move forward quickly, Artium wanted to find a partner that had in-depth expertise with both data and telephony technologies to provide guidance as to how Artium could employ those new technologies most productively for its customers.

Solution

Artium learned about The VIA Group in January 2007 at a kickoff event for Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007. “The VIA Group came highly recommended by Microsoft,” says Christian Frederiksen, Business Development Director for Artium. “As a European-based company, our primary goal was to get advice from The VIA Group about how to design a solution for the U.S. market that included Microsoft Exchange Server 2007 Unified Messaging and Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007. Its expertise in U.S. telecommunications was exactly what we needed.”

With unified messaging, users can send and retrieve voice mail and e-mail messages and can access their calendar and contacts information all through a single inbox. Office Communications Server 2007 provides the foundation for unified communications that unites existing communications systems with productivity tools such as e-mail, voice mail, instant messaging (IM), and conferencing.

Three people from The VIA Group worked with Artium to help the company set up the proof of concept for Exchange Server Unified Messaging and Office Communications Server 2007. The VIA Group team consisted of a senior technologist who designed the solution architecture, a session initiation protocol (SIP) specialist who worked on integrating the local T1 line from the telephone company with Office

Communications Server 2007, and an applications specialist who focused on configuring Exchange Server Unified Messaging and Office Communications Server 2007.

Overcoming Challenges

The initial proof of concept was tested by about 20 Artium employees. The concept consisted of hosted fixed telephony solutions, based on Office Communications Server 2007 and Exchange Server Unified Messaging, to be provided to small and medium-sized businesses in the United States and Europe. After being proven, the architecture would be repackaged and offered to network operators.

The first challenge was how to provide customers all over the United States and Europe with a local phone number even though all the calls went through the Artium hosting center in Seattle, Washington. The Artium hosting center connects to the local exchange through a T1 line, so when Artium requested a new phone number for a customer, that number would have the Seattle local area code. “We’re delivering hosted services for companies all over the world and they don’t want a Seattle area code; they want the area code for their business location,” says Wood.

The VIA Group helped Artium to resolve this issue by working with providers in Europe and the United States to secure the right to purchase local phone numbers in each country. For example, Artium bought phone numbers in Europe from British Telecom that route back to the Artium network in Seattle.

“It took a lot of conference calls across the Atlantic with people from Seattle, Houston, London, and Belgium, and a combination of resilience and expertise from The VIA Group, to help us find the answer,” says Frederiksen.

“The ability to offer unified communications with mobile voice service gives network operators an excellent foundation for high-value services that can increase their revenue.”

Jeff Goodwin, Senior Technologist, The VIA Group

Gaining the Benefit of Experience

The VIA Group worked with Artilium for three months to design the unified messaging architecture and provided additional guidance for designing the Office Communications Server 2007 architecture. The VIA Group also helped Artilium to select the correct media gateway for connecting the Exchange Server Unified Messaging system and Office Communications Server 2007 to the local T1 line.

The gateway decision was particularly important because of the difference in digital transmission between Europe and the United States. Europe uses E1-based lines and the United States uses T1-based lines. “The two are very closely related but have some significant differences in speed and capacity, which make it critical to select the correct media gateway,” says Frederiksen. Based on input from The VIA Group, Artilium chose an AudioCodes Mediant 2000 media gateway because it is highly scalable, carrier-grade equipment and works with both E1-based and T1-based lines. After the gateway was set up, Artilium deployed Exchange Server Unified Messaging and Office Communications Server 2007 on four HP ProLiant DL 360 and DL 380 server computers and deployed the Microsoft Office Communicator 2007 client to 20 users within its organization.

The way the solution works is that when customers sign up for the service, they get a local phone number along with an Exchange Server Unified Messaging inbox. The end users within that customer company have either an IP desk phone or a headset connected to their client computers. When someone places a call to one of those users, the signal is routed to the ARTA server computer in Seattle, which then notifies the user through his or her client computer to pick up the call, or sends the call to the unified messaging inbox. Regardless of where

calls originate, they are charged at a local rate for the point of origin because only the signaling is routed, not the media.

Expanding the Scope

After designing and testing the solution initially for its fixed telephony service customers, Artilium decided to expand its focus to include mobile communications services. “We linked Office Communications Server 2007 directly into the mobile operator switch to give users a single point of presence, which is their mobile number,” says Wood. This solution will be offered for Mobile Virtual Network Operators (MVNO) to repackage and offer under their own brand.

With this system, the mobile phone number is the user’s single point of contact. When that number is called, the system works out the user’s location by using the presence capabilities in Office Communications Server 2007. The presence capabilities can determine whether users are in the office, on the computer, or on the land-line or mobile phone. And users can specify how the call should be handled based on where they are at the time.

“Our system can detect a user’s location by using the Office Communications Server 2007 presence capability and can then route calls accordingly. When a user is in the office, the system routes calls straight through to the Office Communicator 2007 client,” says Wood. “When the user is at a customer’s office, the system can automatically route calls to a designated administrative assistant or to voice mail. Users can configure the system to route calls from certain people, such as an administrative assistant, straight through to their mobile phones while other callers are routed to voice mail.”

The proof of concept for the mobile unified communications solution was completed in October 2007 and demonstrated at the

Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, in February 2008. At that time Artilium started testing the solution with several of its own departments. It expects to start offering the new services to external network operator customers toward the end of 2008.

Adding Real-Time Support

In addition to helping its customers take advantage of the unified communications capabilities of Office Communications Server 2007, The VIA Group also uses those capabilities to deliver better customer service. The VIA Group has “federated” with some of its customers who use Office Communications Server 2007 to provide them with real-time support. “We give these customers specific customer-support representatives with whom they can federate,” says Goodwin. “So throughout the day as they need to get quick answers, they can send instant messages to a representative and then escalate to voice communication if necessary.”

Benefits

By helping Artilium to gain expertise with unified communications, The VIA Group helped the company to add higher revenue services, shorten the learning curve on unified communications, and provide more productive connectivity. In addition, The VIA Group uses Office Communications Server 2007 in its own organization to streamline collaboration and enhance customer service.

Higher Revenue Services

By using the unified messaging, real-time presence, voice over IP (VoIP), and call handling capabilities in Exchange Server 2007 and Office Communications Server 2007, Artilium will be able to quickly roll out innovative services for its customers with relatively little development effort. This is expected to expand the company's revenue potential by not only adding services but by adding services that offer higher value to its

customers. “The ability to offer unified communications with mobile voice service gives network operators an excellent foundation for high-value services that can increase their revenue,” says Goodwin.

Shortened Learning Curve

In teaming up with The VIA Group, Artilium gained both instant expertise in unified communications and knowledge transfer to equip its staff to continue to build on the initial framework. As a result, the company was able to complete its proof of concept for the fixed telephony solution within just three months, expediting time-to-market. “There’s no doubt that the knowledge and expertise that The VIA Group provided about U.S. telecommunication systems design has significantly sped up the whole design and implementation phase for us,” says Frederiksen. “Even though we were exploring some new territory, they stayed focused on the goal until we had a solution.”

Enhanced Connectivity

Although the mobile unified communications solution is still in the testing phase, Artilium is gaining value from Office Communications Server 2007 within its own organization. “The fact that you can look at your contact list and see whether someone is available is quite a timesaving feature because you can just pick up the phone and give that person a call or send him or her a quick IM,” says Wood.

Users are also finding increased communications efficiency through instant messaging. “An IM conversation is a much more real-time and coherent conversation than e-mail, which means you get more benefit from that communication but without having to disturb someone with a voice call,” says Wood. These communications tools save individuals at the company maybe only 10 minutes a day, but they shorten problem resolution by days, which can significantly improve the company's responsiveness.

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For more information about Artilium products and services, call 32 (0) 50 230 300 or visit the Web site at: www.artilium.com

Streamlined Collaboration

The VIA Group gains significant collaboration benefits from the capabilities in Office Communications Server 2007. For example, the firm uses the conferencing capabilities in Office Communications Server 2007 to have much more productive internal meetings with remote users. "We hold a lot of impromptu meetings, and with Office Communications Server 2007 we're able to bring voice and video to some rather remote end users so that they can see the entire conference and interact more easily than with just a voice phone call," says Goodwin. The VIA Group also uses Microsoft Office Live Meeting to collaborate on documents in real time. "In the past, we'd send e-mail messages back and forth with updates and revisions, but with Office Live Meeting we can interact in real time," Goodwin adds.

Improved Customer Service

The VIA Group also employs Office Communications Server 2007 to enhance its customer service. By federating its support representatives with customers through Office Communications Server 2007, The VIA Group is able to provide much more immediate customer support. "Customers can just look to see whether a representative is available and then send an IM or call to get the issue resolved in real time, which significantly enhances the customer service experience," says Goodwin.

Microsoft Office System

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Software and Services

- Microsoft Office
 - Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007
 - Microsoft Office Communicator 2007
- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2007

Hardware

- AudioCodes Mediant 2000 gateway
- HP ProLiant DL 360 server computers
- HP ProLiant DL 380 server computers

Partners

- The VIA Group