

Cisco IP telephony helps an ambitious housing association grow

When Broadacres decided to relocate to a purpose-built site, this was the catalyst to revamp its networks and telephony. Ultimately, BT Engage IT provided a complete unified communications and IP telephony (IPT) solution, extending to the 24/7 contact centre and featuring seamless integration with a Tunstall system, essential for the Social Alarm, and including new local and wide area networks.“

About Broadacres Housing

Broadacres Housing Association delivers a wide range of services to 4,500 homes in North Yorkshire from its headquarters in North allerton and offices in seven local authorities. In addition to providing its own around-the-clock 0800 tenant services, its call centre facility is used by other housing associations, local authorities, and private individuals who subscribe to the emergency Social Alarm service. This service supports vulnerable people such as the elderly, providing a lifeline to the emergency services.

Why BT Engage IT?

“When we decided to replace our PBX, Cisco recommended BT Engage IT,” says Matt Dowdy, ICT Manager, Broadacres. “Importantly, BT Engage IT had experience working with not-for-profit organisations like Broadacres. We visited a Housing Association and Local Authority that had similar systems from BT Engage IT. These provided a very open, non-scripted forum where we could discuss issues and ask questions.” BT Engage IT has been chosen by the National Housing Federation and Cisco to support a joint initiative to communicate the benefits of IP communications to federation members.

At the time, Broadacres had a ‘traditional’ digital PBX system for its telephony and contact centre. The Social Alarm is handled initially by a Tunstall PNC4 system before these priority calls pass into the PBX. In the centralised call centre, staff each had their own PC and phone, with no capabilities for distributed or home working. Broadacres perceived IPT as a way of ensuring inclusivity: giving staff at all sites access to the same services, such as voicemail and internal directory, and extending to homeworkers. “BT Engage IT

understood what we wanted to achieve,” says Dowdy. “We were particularly attracted by the fact BT Engage IT could provide a complete internal networking infrastructure as well as telephony platform. I drove a hard bargain: we have to be seen to be achieving real value for money, which means considering ongoing support costs as well as purchase cost – a big issue – and we did look at other possible suppliers. But Cisco was our preferred technology and, once BT Engage IT provided the right model, we moved forward.”

Planning & Project Management

For the solution to deliver what Broadacres wanted, meticulous planning was essential. Dowdy says, “BT Engage IT supplied an experienced Project Manager who chaired meetings, dealt with the engineers and ensured the project got the resources it needed. Other external agencies had to be involved, and it was important we all worked together.” The nature of Broadacres’ business and its vital community role meant the BT Engage IT solution was designed to eliminate any single points of failure across the local and wide area networks, IP telephony and contact centre elements. As the organisation grows, its goal is to become ever more commercially viable in the range of services it offers and the number of tenders it wins. Because of this, Broadacres was seeking the highest level of accreditation for service and security. Indeed, all elements had to be configured to ensure a high availability, highly resilient solution to help Broadacres get the accreditation it wanted, and so secure more business in the future – as well as providing new services and functionality to improve its operations.

Making the change

“We shut down operations at the old building at 2.30pm on Friday and were open for business at the new site at 8.45am Monday morning,” says Dowdy, “BT Engage IT delivered a complete networking and telephony platform, including the call centre, coming in ahead of schedule. We always put customer service first. When we shut down activity at the old site, there was a 15-minute hiatus with no activity, caused by work at the local BT exchange. We had people taking calls throughout the weekend while our own people, BT Engage IT and a Tunstall engineer ensured a seamless transition.” Integration with Tunstall was critical, with lives at stake. According to Andy May, ICT Systems and Network Administrator, “This was potentially tricky for BT Engage IT. Calls have to go into the Social Alarm service rather than be diverted into the BT Engage IT-Cisco system. And this is why BT Engage IT designed such a robust solution with a complete failsafe system. 100 percent uptime is essential and we can’t miss a single call.”

Dowdy says, “We were very clear in the scoping document how we wanted it all to work. Over the weekend, the engineers worked to make it

“BT Engage IT delivered what we wanted, how we wanted it, on time, from when we placed the order to going live, it was under two months. The time scales were very tight but we had confidence BT Engage IT could deliver.”

Matt Dowdy,
ICT Manager,
Broadacres Housing

Case Study

“Throughout, I was very impressed with the BT Engage IT people. They did whatever was necessary to get the system delivered on time. Another advantage is we have the same BT Engage IT engineer who implemented the system providing support. Continuity like that is very important.”
Matt Dowdy,
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happen. One of the great things about the scoping document was that BT Engage IT used its previous experiences in putting it together. They knew what to ask and how the various configurations could be done. Everything was mapped out, and BT Engage IT achieved it all. The result was that we maintained our commitment to customer service. Despite this big change, we received no complaints, either internally or from customers.”

The optimum solution

For resilience, BT Engage IT provided a stacked switch infrastructure, Cisco 3750 switches, in the core of the network. End user connectivity is provided by powered Cisco 3560 switches; Layer 3 capable devices that allow the configuration of routing and policies such as Quality of Service throughout the network. The core of the IPT solution is Cisco CallManager, which extends enterprise telephony features and functions to packet telephony network devices including IP phones.

For Broadacres' remote sites, CallManager was combined with the Survivable Remote Site Telephony feature in Cisco IOS software, enabling the organisation to extend IP telephony to branch offices. Dowdy says, “With our secure broadband network, we were able to ‘farm out’ IP telephony to all staff in all locations. We can now accommodate requests for flexible working, giving people a complete technology set-up at home. And with the fixed costs of the broadband network, we’re not incurring additional charges for telephony.” Andy May adds, “The Cisco phones provide complete extension mobility. Staff can log-on from any location. Quite often, people work from various housing offices through the week. When they log-in with their phones, it’s just like their PC: they have all the same services and personalised settings.”

BT Engage IT also deployed Cisco IP Contact Centre (IPCC) Express in a high availability configuration, providing the necessary resilience to handle Social Alarm calls. IPCC Express is designed to simplify business application integration, ease agent administration, increase agent flexibility and provide efficiency gains in network hosting.

In addition, Broadacres now has detailed reports on activity in its contact centre and service levels. “This helps us address performance issues and deliver better service,” says Dowdy. “We built the solution as a likeness of our old system, so we already understood the procedures and could instantly know if something wasn’t right. The opportunity now is to start changing things, to improve services even more. For example, installing wallboard technology in the call centre to see calls waiting, response times, and so on. The flexible software-based system means it easy to make changes to support improvements.”

He adds, “Since we installed our solution, average call waiting times have reduced. In general, we

have a greater capacity to handle more calls more efficiently. For instance, distributing calls to agents in the optimum ways, something we couldn’t do previously. Staff spend more time on the phone, serving customers.” Andy May says, “We’ve also seen cost benefits. For example, in calls between our remote offices, which used to be via a leased line. Now, those calls are free.” Dowdy concludes, “Throughout, I was very impressed with the BT Engage IT people. They did whatever was necessary to get the system delivered on time. They were a pleasure to work with. Another advantage is we have the same BT Engage IT engineer who implemented the system providing support. Continuity like that is very important. Our job now is to build on this great foundation, working with BT Engage IT to exploit all the benefits of the technology. We have ambitions to be a major player, which means having a sound technology infrastructure. I believe we have ‘bullet-proofed’ our technology as much as anyone can. For example, having the capacity to offer a complete out-of-hours service, to win contracts with other associations and local authorities. We have to be sure our equipment and systems will work 24/7, 365 day’s a year, in the ways we want. We have confidence in our BT Engage IT-Cisco solution.”

Customer profile

Industry: Housing

Solution: Unified Communications

Technology: Cisco IP Telephony, Cisco IP Contact Centre Express, LAN & WAN

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