Firm Foundation

Verteks Consulting helps Ocala National Bank architect an IT infrastructure that will support its growth.

Few people would attempt to build a house without a blueprint, yet many businesses build their technology infrastructures without a real plan, tacking on new parts as the organization evolves. Not so Ocala National Bank. Chief Operating Officer Kyle Kay recognized the costs and inefficiencies associated with a piecemeal approach to technology, and set out to create a foundation for the bank's future.

"We were contemplating the next stage of the bank's growth, and I knew that for us to go to the next level we needed to get the proper infrastructure in place. A big part of that was IT," Kay said. "We are building a third branch and have a fourth in the planning stages. We needed to expand our IT capabilities in order to grow the organization, not just in size but in locations."

The next step was to find an IT architect who could transform Kay's vision into a technology plan. Kay turned to Don Gulling, president of Verteks Consulting.

"Don and I started talking about his company's capabilities and my goals for the bank and I could tell immediately that we were on the same page," Kay said. "He knew what I wanted and knew how to articulate that in terms of IT."

Converging Voice and Data

The first step was to replace the bank's phone system with a voice over IP (VoIP) system. VoIP enables phone

calls to be transmitted over the data network, making the phone system much more flexible and easier to expand.

"If I want to move my office to another location, all I have to do is unplug my phone and take it to the new location," Kay said. "The phone is identified as mine in the network, so I don't have to reprogram anything."

Kay says the VoIP will also save the bank money over the long haul. New locations can be added to the voice and data network without reinventing the wheel.

"The cost savings is realized as the organization expands. It does not cost as much to expand now that the basic framework is in place," he said. "There's also cost savings in terms of time. We don't have to go through the effort of figuring out how to bring a new branch online. The new location is accommodated on our central network so that all we have to do is make sure the new location is configured according to Verteks Consultings' standards, then plug it in and fire it up."

Now that the VoIP system is in place, Ocala National Bank is exploring ways to take advantage of its unique features. For example, the bank can set up phone numbers tied to a particular ad campaign, or separate numbers for various functional areas. It's easy and inexpensive to add the new numbers to the system, and call volume data can be tracked and analyzed.

Technical Support

The second phase of the bank's IT infrastructure overhaul involved a plan to monitor and maintain all its PCs. The bank needed additional technical staff to handle software updates and other maintenance. Verteks provides that service, along with technical support.

"If we have a problem we can call the Verteks help desk and they'll try to determine if it's something simple they can troubleshoot over the phone," Kay said. "If not they'll send a technician. If it's not an emergency they'll be here in 24 hours but if it's an emergency they'll be here in an hour."

Having that kind of support has increased the bank's productivity. For example, it takes much less time to set up a
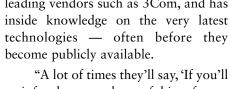
system for a new hire.

"When we add an employee all I have to do is order a desk and PC. Verteks comes in and configures the PC to the particular department's specifications, and sets up e-mail and everything for the individual," Kay said.

Verteks Consulting serves as liaison between Ocala National Bank and other service providers. The firm also maintains strong partnerships with leading vendors such as 3Com, and has inside knowledge on the very latest technologies — often before they become publicly available.

"A lot of times they'll say, 'If you'll wait for the next release of this software it's going to solve several problems plus give you several more features,' which is very nice to know," Kay said.

Looking Ahead

In the near term, Kay would like Verteks to set up wireless LANs in each location so that executive officers can easily access the network from their laptops. He would also like to utilize videoconferencing to enhance communication between the locations. But most importantly he looks to Verteks to aid in the bank's ongoing growth and expansion.

"As we continue to branch, Verteks can come in knowing what our goals are and set up the IT plan for each new location," Kay said. "And as needs arise, we look to Verteks to recommend solutions. A lot of times I'll ask Don, 'Is it possible, what I'm thinking of?' And he'll say, 'Sure, we've done that for three other organizations.' That experience really helps."

Organizations that have no IT strategy in place waste time and money tacking on pieces and parts. Ocala National Bank has both a plan and a technology partner with the knowledge and experience to help take the bank into the future.

"We have just 55 employees but we have an IT department comparable to an organization with 1,500 employees," Kay said. "If your organization is growing and moving to the next stage of development, it's very reassuring to have a company like Verteks Consulting working for you."

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>
> **— Kyle Kay, COO**
> **Ocala National Bank**

Verteks Consulting Attains Microsoft Gold-Certified Partner Status

Verteks Consulting further distinguishes itself by earning a Microsoft competency in Advanced Infrastructure Solutions.

Verteks Consulting, a leading provider of voice and data networks for business and government, has attained Gold Certified status in the Microsoft Partner Program with a competency in Advanced Infrastructure Solutions. The award recognizes the Ocala, Fla.-based firm's expertise and total impact in the technology marketplace.

As a Gold Certified partner, Verteks Consulting has demonstrated expertise with Microsoft technologies and proven ability to meet customers' needs. Microsoft Gold Certified Partners receive a rich set of benefits, including access, training and support, giving them a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

"We are extremely pleased to have attained Gold Certified status in the Microsoft Partner Program. This allows us to clearly promote our expertise and relationship with Microsoft to our customers," said Don Gulling, President of Verteks Consulting. "The benefits provided through our Gold Certified status will allow us to continue to enhance the offerings that we provide for customers. We're very excited to begin our 10th year in business as a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner."

"Customers are looking for partner companies that can bridge the gap between their business demands and technology capabilities. They need to trust in someone that can act as an expert adviser for their long-term strategic technology plans. Microsoft

Gold Certified Partners, which have certified expertise and direct training and support from Microsoft, can build a positive customer experience with our technologies," said Allison Watson, vice president of the Worldwide Partner Sales and Marketing Group at Microsoft Corp. "Microsoft recognizes Verteks Consulting as a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner for demonstrating its expertise in providing customer satisfaction with Microsoft products and technology."

As one of the requirements for attaining Gold Certified Status, Verteks Consulting had to declare a Microsoft Competency. Microsoft Competencies are designed to help differentiate a partner's capabilities with specific Microsoft technologies to customers looking for a particular type of solution. Each competency has a unique set of requirements and benefits, formulated to accurately represent the specific skills and services that partners bring to the technology industry.

The Advanced Infrastructure Solutions Competency is designed for partners with proven expertise in designing and/or implementing complex infrastructure solutions such as Active Directory-based and Microsoft

Integration Server design and deployment solutions, or Microsoft Exchange Server migration or deployment solutions. Because customers are increasingly asking to do more with less, partners with the Advanced Infrastructure Solutions Competency can identify their unique skill in helping customers access management solutions, improving operational efficiency and reducing security risks.

"Our industry partners allow us to deliver high-quality solutions and applications to our customers. And we're always looking at ways to improve our relationships," said Paul Flessner, senior vice president of the Server Platform Division at Microsoft. "Solutions Competencies enable Microsoft to provide resources and training to partners seeking to meet, and even surpass, customer needs. The competencies also provide industry partners with a way to showcase their expertise to customers who depend on them for services, such as building their critical infrastructure needs such as storage and hosting solutions."

The Microsoft Partner Program was launched in December 2003 and represents Microsoft's ongoing commitment to the success of partners worldwide. The program offers a single, integrated partnering framework that recognizes partner expertise, rewards the total impact that partners have in the technology marketplace, and delivers more value to help partners' businesses be successful.

Zero Tolerance

New breed of filters closes the gap on virus outbreaks.

Just a few short years ago, computer viruses caused more aggravation than significant damage. Distributed mainly by infected diskettes, they took a long time to spread and do damage. Anti-virus vendors had plenty of time to develop countermeasures based on the virus signature, the unique binary pattern that — like a fingerprint — can be used to identify malicious code.

Signatures still form the basis of most anti-virus measures, but they are becoming increasingly inadequate to prevent outbreaks. With spam distribution technology, a virus-laden e-mail can be sent to many millions of computers well before anti-virus vendors have been able to develop and distribute corresponding signatures.

In a recent Osterman Research survey of 115 IT and security managers from 12 vertical segments, 93 percent reported that their organizations had been infiltrated by some form of malicious code, even though all of them reported having anti-virus protection in place. Since signatures are fully effective once they are released, this level of vulnerability is primarily due to exposure during the so-called "zero hour" — the interval between the launch of a new virus and the identification and distribution of its unique signature.

"It is striking to note that more than three out of four messaging decision-makers consider zero-hour virus protection to be important or extremely important in the context of protect-

ing their messaging systems," said Michael Osterman, president of Osterman Research. "We anticipate that anti-virus vendors will be quite aggressive over the next 24 months in developing zero-hour protection capabilities integrated with their anti-virus offerings."

Vendors are attacking this problem in several ways, but a common approach is to isolate e-mail containing programs that could be viruses. Vendors use automated tools to analyze these files and make educated guesses about the potential for malicious activity based on rule sets they've developed — a technique known as heuristic detection. Common indicators, for example, would be any code that attempts to replicate itself or install itself in a computer's boot sequence.

While they all take somewhat different approaches, these virus outbreak filters generally analyze global traffic patterns to identify anomalies. Any suspect files are then quarantined until the traditional anti-virus signatures are updated.

Each time a new signature is issued, the quarantined files are re-

scanned. Messages that do not match the outbreak signature are then released. While this process can result in false positives that temporarily delay legitimate e-mail messages, the tradeoff is significantly better protection. Industry experts say these tools provide protection an average of about 14 hours ahead of signature availability. IronPort claims its filters have stopped approximately 5 million malicious messages before they could infect desktops, saving customers an estimated $100 million in clean-up costs.

A series of recent viruses and worms clearly demonstrated how rapidly malware can spread across the Internet. The MS Blaster, Slammer, Sasser and Korgo.W worms showed that signature-based antivirus software is not enough to protect networks. While traditional anti-virus tools remain essential to any organization's security infrastructure, organizations of all sizes need to realize that reliance on signature-based products creates a significant window of vulnerability — one that virus writers will continue to target it in various ways.

"Most new virus outbreaks proliferate rapidly, rather than spreading slowly and silently," said Richi Jennings, e-mail security practice lead at Ferris Research. "In the face of this trend, there's now a clear need for zero-hour virus protection. Traditional signature-based approaches will not be able to protect users fully from these new rapid-fire outbreaks."

Reducing Software Piracy Could Bring $400 Billion in Economic Growth, IDC Says

You may want to hold on to your wallet the next time the price of a software title seems too good to be true. It could be an illegal sale.

Microsoft recently filed seven lawsuits against nine individuals from California, Maryland, New York, Texas and Virginia for allegedly selling not-for-resale software. The software was obtained through the Microsoft Action Pack Subscriptions (MAPS) Initiative, a program that provides eligible partners with discounted Microsoft software packages for product evaluation and internal use. Some of those named in the suits allegedly attempted to sell software from their subscriptions to consumers through online auction sites. The MAPS agreement stipulates that the software may not be resold.

Three other lawsuits, filed by Microsoft against companies in Flori-da, Ohio and Pennsylvania, allege counterfeit software abuses. In those cases, Microsoft was responding to consumer complaints filed through (800) RU-LEGIT (785-3448).

Microsoft's honest resellers and partners are not the only ones harmed by the practices of software pirates and counterfeiters. Businesses and consumers who use unlicensed, counterfeit or pirated software are not eligible for technical support or product updates, and may unwittingly facilitate the transmission of malicious code onto their systems.

Software piracy also has a global economic impact. Cutting the global piracy rate of 35 percent by 10 percentage points over a four-year period could generate 2.4 million new jobs, $400 billion in economic growth and $67 billion in tax revenues worldwide, according to a new IDC study released by the Business Software Alliance. Based on Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development figures, this new revenue could provide 435 million people with job training benefits, healthcare services for 45 million people, computers for more than 33 million school children or college degrees for 6.6 million people.

"We support the Business Software Alliance's ongoing efforts to raise awareness about the economic impact of global software piracy," said Orlando Ayala, Microsoft VP for small and midmarket solutions. "Every year, millions of consumers and businesses are hurt by counterfeit software which they have purchased unwittingly, and many companies that sell legitimate software have difficulty competing with low prices offered by software pirates."

VoIP Branches Out

Voice over IP technology brings functionality, ease of management and lower costs to the branch office.

The days of the single-location business may be numbered. Even the smallest of companies are opening branch locations to extend their sales reach and better serve customers.

Unfortunately, branch offices are notoriously expensive to operate. The voice and data infrastructure must be replicated and maintained for a handful of users — at substantial cost per user. By necessity, many satellite offices operate with scaled back functionality and connectivity, particularly in terms of voice communications.

Voice over IP (VoIP) can help organizations successfully overcome geographic boundaries. With VoIP, branch offices can enjoy the features of the headquarters phone system without the need to purchase a separate PBX.

Phones Alone

The simplest way to extend a VoIP system to a branch office is to purchase additional IP-enabled phones. The phones connect to the headquarters VoIP system over a broadband Internet connection.

A number of phone set choices are available, including proprietary IP phone hardware and PC-based softphones — although some users might balk at not having a traditional phone set. If the VoIP system supports Session Initiation Protocol (SIP), SIP-enabled phones can provide advanced features at a fraction of the cost of proprietary IP phones.

There are several problems with this approach. One is availability — if the data line goes down, the branch office has lost voice connectivity. More significant is the lack of a local phone number. Phones connected to a VoIP system in another area code can't be given a local number, and local calls made through the phones will end up being long-distance once they pass through the server.

Opening the Gateway

Due to these limitations, larger branch offices will likely require a VoIP gateway. Call processing still happens at the headquarters VoIP system, but local IP phones register with the gateway rather than directly. The gateway connects to the public telephone network as well as the WAN, and can redirect calls should the data line go down.

A gateway can also improve voice quality by separating the data channel from the voice channel. Even with a poor Internet connection users will have voice quality comparable to the public telephone network.

Of course, adding a gateway increases equipment costs and introduces remote site management headaches while adding only limited functionality. If scalability and functionality are more important than minimizing costs, it makes more sense to install a separate low-end VoIP system in the branch office. Software tools enable the systems to operate in tandem and be managed from headquarters.

Lower Costs and Beyond

In addition to reducing capital expenditures on premises equipment, VoIP reduces total cost of ownership. Support costs are less because technicians don't have to travel to remote offices to handle moves and changes. Users simply plug their phones into the network — the phones automatically reconfigure themselves.

VoIP systems also allow organizations to consolidate certain functions. For example, there's no need to have a receptionist in each location because all calls can be answered at headquarters and routed to the appropriate extension.

However, it's important that organizations look beyond cost-cutting to the other benefits of VoIP in the branch office. The key here, of course, is functionality. A VoIP system gives branch offices features like call routing and auto-attendant, and even makes advanced functions such as conferencing and unified messaging affordable.

Branch offices are critical to the success of many companies. They pro-vide a critical touch point between the company and its customers and open up a new range of prospects. However, branch office infrastructures can be extremely expensive to set up and maintain. VoIP helps to reduce the cost of extending the voice infrastructure to remote locations, while streamlining management and providing enhanced functionality.

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