

Pembina schools experience the “third wave”

Pembina Trails School Division implements unified communications

by David Levy

AT PEMBINA TRAILS SCHOOL Division in Manitoba, the telephone system is an important link between the past and the future. Pembina Trails faced the daunting task of merging two distinct telephone and information technology systems after its creation five years ago by the amalgamation of two existing school divisions. Don Reece, the director of information technology at Pembina Trails said the situation the new district inherited was a “vendor’s delight,” because one school division had been paying for telephones centrally, while the other division paid school by school; one division had a wireless network and the other had leased fibre; and, one division used Active Directory from Microsoft while the other was organized around Novell technology, so as Reece said, “It was really a dog’s breakfast.” To keep some systems operational, school division staff were even buying used equipment on eBay because it was no longer available from the manufacturer.

Reece and his IT staff knew their existing telephony providers had them boxed in to proprietary solutions but when they began to investigate VoIP alternatives, things did not look much better. “When we looked at VoIP, we looked at all the big players and they were all telling us, ‘you’re going to have to buy some proprietary hardware and you’re going to need some proprietary networking software if you want to run our solution’” Reece said. “Well, our goal was to leverage our existing bandwidth and our existing hardware infrastructure and our existing Active Directory to run SIP-VoIP on top of it and that is exactly what Unified Communications Server from Objectworld does.” UC Server is a VoIP phone system software that provides VoIP, unified messaging and unified communications to Microsoft Windows platforms.

With unified communications, Pembina Trails teachers and staff get their phone, fax,



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email and messages right at their desktops. School district IT and telephony staff already had the skills they needed to operate the system, and a variety of vendors can now compete for future business. Instead of buying services from outside vendors, Pembina Trails staff can do all the ‘moves, adds and changes’ themselves. The VoIP telephone system can act as a public address system or broadcast audio and video to all the classrooms and buildings in the district. The VoIP solution alone has the potential to cut \$200,000 a year in operational expenses.

Rather than loading every desktop with the latest gadgets and obscure features, the Pembina Trails IT staff focused on how their staff and teachers work right now. For instance, instead of installing headsets with every system, Reece said, “They still have a handset, but it is a \$20 handset and they still dial using their numeric keyboard onscreen.” It is important to minimize the transition, he explained. “When you have a teacher who is three years from retirement putting a headset on, they don’t want that. That is what they

balk at. What they are used to is holding a phone in their hand.”

Don Reece advised managers who are considering a similar project to assemble solid information. “If you try to write a business case and you don’t understand how your current system works, you can get in big trouble,” he said. “When my boss said, ‘what’s the business case,’ I knew what the current dollars were. I had a baseline.”

Today, Pembina Trails School Division is one of the most technologically advanced districts in the country, with 14,000 students in 33 schools enjoying virtually unlimited bandwidth delivered by 44 kilometres of fibre optic cable. Even better, the system is open and expandable in future because, as Reece said, “Now we have people who are pushing us to have more services.”

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