



Microsoft Unified Communications - You can teach your PBX new tricks

by Don Penland of Project Leadership Associates

ABOUT PROJECT LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES

Project Leadership Associates is a leading provider of business and information technology consulting services to corporations across the country. Our experienced consultants work with clients to plan, develop, manage, implement and support practical, cost-effective information technology strategies and solutions.

Our professional services include:

- Network Integration
- Business Intelligence
- Software Development
- Management Consulting
- Business Strategy Execution
- Small Business Services

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Penland has over nine years in the network integration, professional services field. Don is the Unified Communication and Collaboration Solution Group Leader for Project Leadership Associates. Don's team has extensive experience in implementing and supporting Microsoft Active Directory, Exchange and Unified Communications voice solutions for enterprise organizations.

Don is a founding advisor of the Midwest Messaging and Collaboration User Group (www.mmccug.org). This user group was founded with Microsoft and other partners to share information with fellow messaging and collaboration professionals to drive a community of knowledge sharing based on these key solutions.

Project Leadership Associates (PLA) relies heavily on data and voice networks to run its business. Both networks provide critical services to help deliver best in class professional services and a communication infrastructure to effectively collaborate and communicate with customers. Like many organizations, PLA struggled with how to converge these two networks. While PLA understood the value that could be added to the infrastructure and ultimately to customers by implementing solutions such as unified messaging and VoIP, the optimal return on investment could not be achieved by simply fork lifting and replacing the current infrastructure. As PLA evaluated expanding into other floors within its Chicago office, a strategic Unified Communications decision had to be made.

PLA has long been considered a go-to-partner in the area of messaging, specifically Microsoft Exchange upgrades and migrations from third party platforms like Novell GroupWise and IBM Lotus Notes. In addition, PLA also has considerable experience implementing Microsoft Live Communication Server (LCS) for customers to provide presence and instant messaging (IM). As PLA worked with these technologies, it found that implementing LCS for IM and presence was extremely valuable within its own organization. With consultants that travel from client to client in many different geographic locations, presence provided a new capability to find people and helped employees better collaborate with those folks that often felt they were on isolated islands.

It was critical that the Unified Communications solution selected add new value to current investments by leaving the traditional PBX in place. Those current investments included a legacy Merlin Legend PBX and an Active Directory and Exchange 2003 infrastructure. PLA decided that its strategic Unified Communications solution would entail Microsoft Exchange 2007 Unified Messaging and Office Communications Server 2007 with Enterprise Voice. It also decided that the best way to implement this technology was in controlled phases, using the same methodology that is employed in customer projects.

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The first step in this strategy was to upgrade the messaging platform to Microsoft Exchange 2007. PLA had planned on upgrading the systems anyway due to legacy hardware. Once the upgrade was complete the next step was to integrate a Dialogic analog gateway with the legacy PBX and implement Exchange 2007 Unified Messaging. Over the next few months legacy voicemail was replaced with this new technology. The initial focus was for internal office users that had traditional voicemail, but PLA quickly realized that its consultants could benefit from this new technology as well. The solution was adopted very quickly with little end user training, even less for technical administrative staff. Although this is not an exhaustive list, the following value has been recognized from the UM deployment:

- **Reduced cost.** PLA was able to drop its yearly service and maintenance cost with a third party telephony organization. With Unified Messaging, the Exchange Network Administrator is able to provide support and manage the new “voicemail” system.
- **Voice Access.** Users like the ability to use Outlook Voice Access (OVA) to manage their voicemail, email and calendar entries. For example, utilizing OVA a user is able to notify the attendees of a meeting that they will be 5 – 10 minutes late or clear their calendar for the rest of the day. All of these options are available from any phone; many of the organization’s business development managers use this feature while driving to appointments to be more productive during driving downtime.
- **Play on Phone.** Many of PLA’s consultants are at client sites where they may not want to play a voicemail over their laptop speakers; instead they can click the Play on Phone feature and enter their cell phone or desktop phone number. UM will dial the user and play the voicemail over that configured device.

After PLA completed the upgrade to Exchange 2007 and deployment of Unified Messaging, focus turned to upgrading the LCS 2005 infrastructure. PLA originally deployed the public beta of Office Communications Server 2007 and moved all users to a new Enterprise Pool in the Chicago data center. Once the IM and presence upgrade was complete, new features available with OCS were deployed; for example, on-premise web and audio/video conferencing. PLA also integrated the legacy PBX with OCS and moved several users’ PBX extensions onto the OCS infrastructure. Those users were able to remove their legacy digital handset and began using Office Communicator as their soft phone or a USB endpoint provided by LG-Nortel. Finally, PLA was able to provide the value of VoIP with its existing PBX and without a VPN. As a result, consultants log into Office Communicator over an encrypted port and they are able to place Communicator to Communicator VoIP calls and make outbound PSTN calls through one client! In addition, PLA has been able to reduce third party conferencing calls in half by utilizing the voice conferencing features of OCS.

In summary, PLA has had the same struggles and decision points that its customers have had with how to implement a Unified Communications strategy without replacing legacy investments. Like many organizations, PLA found that adding Exchange 2007 UM and OCS was a way to add additional life to the existing legacy PBX allowing the organization to focus investments on innovative ways to help their business and customers rather than replacing every phone in the office. PLA proved that you can teach your PBX new tricks!

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