

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview on behalf of Qwest

James Russell

Rothstein Kass

Principal, Information Technology G

Last updated: 2008 Nov 17



Product(s): CPE: Cisco 2800 Series Routers, CPE: Cisco 3800 Series Routers, iQ: Internet Port, iQ: Private Port
Industry: Accounting

1. Business need

"Our main business drivers for this were during the end of 2005. We were moving our facilities, and as part of that we were rolling out a new voice over IP phone system, and since we were planning on also including that with all of our offices across the nation utilizing the same system--we needed to have an MPLS [multi-protocol label switching] network is really what it came down to, so we could get that quality of service between all of our sites. And the provider we were using at the time, other than some just general displeasure with it, they did not offer the level of service we needed to really carry our VoIP solution. And also, depending on the area of the country we were in, we didn't always have the same provider. So we really wanted a single solution provider across the country with all of our offices to help keep track of everything from billing and really just single point of contact for any issues we had. And we wanted to leverage our VoIP solution. A majority of our equipment would be in our headquarters office, based in New Jersey, and we did not want to have redundant systems in every single office, so we wanted to really minimize the amount of equipment we needed in each of our offices, leverage the main components in our headquarters office here, and that really is what pushed us to look into new providers."

2. Evaluation & selection

"When we were looking for providers, we realized what we needed, in doing some of our own in-house research, was the MPLS solution. So we had a telecom consultant and they assisted us with an RFP process, and we approached all of the top vendors with MPLS offerings out there and really narrowed it down to the top three. The top three ended up being Qwest, Verizon, and AT&T. With the Qwest solution, it was the iQ Private [Qwest iQ Networking® Private Port], and then Verizon had their private IP Gold CAR, and AT&T with their private networking transport. They came back; we had many follow-up meetings and when we narrowed it down, we really came out with Qwest really at the top of the list."

3. Why Qwest?

"There's a few different reasons. The quality of the solution was really one of the big drivers. Just going through with each of the providers that ended up in our top three, Qwest really seemed to have the most pure MPLS design and it wasn't a combination of various technologies that were kind of built up over time. It really seemed to be, from the ground up, built as an MPLS solution.

They also offered the ability to work in all of the areas of the country we were in. They were there--again, it goes back to our wanting to have a single point of contact for all of our sites.

We also, as part of the RFP process and follow-up, checked with references and referrals. In our industry, there were other accounting firms that have used Qwest and we approached them, discussed what their experience was, got some good feedback from them.

Also, the end-to-end quality of service was very important because of our VoIP and our other technologies that we want to roll out. The knowledge of the account team that came out; they knew what we were looking for. They were very knowledgeable in everything that we needed and they were able to answer our questions. And finally, while all of that's important, it was also the price of the solution, which was very important as well."

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4. The implementation/installation

"Our implementation took place over the course of 12 months, and that was planned. We started at the end of the year of 2005. So we were able to get two of our larger offices done at that time, and then because of the nature of our business and not wanting to disrupt our users during the tax season, we kind of took that time and really didn't do any deployments, and then started up again come May of 2006 and finalized the rollouts in our other offices. We set the time frames that we needed to have things in place and with ordering equipment, getting lines in, there's a lot of really tight schedules due to lead times or just times of the year, and when we had critical things coming up internally, we were able to meet those timelines. You know, it was close sometimes, but we didn't have any issues where we had to push off any deployments. We were able to really get the implementations in and on time."

5. Experience with partner/VAR consultants

"The partner we used for our rollout was called Comm-Works, and they assisted us with the rollouts in our New Jersey, Beverly Hills, and San Francisco offices. And during that time, we have several engineers on staff here who went through the process with them in each site, and the engineers did some knowledge transfer to allow us to kind of pick up what was being done to allow us to do the additional rollouts in our last four offices on our own. But you know, there were things that came up where we would have questions and we were able to reach out to them, and overall their expertise was very, very good and they were able to assist us with a number of issues that otherwise we would have been stuck on. So, I definitely think that using their partner helped us get the implementations done on time."

6. Overview of solution

"Our Qwest solution is pretty much identical in all of our sites from a design standpoint. The only thing that changes is really the amount of bandwidth for each site, and that really depends on the size of the site, the number of users, and so on. But what we have in each site is dual MPLS lines coming in and then an additional basic Internet line as a backup. And each of the MPLS lines utilize the gateway diversity, as well as local access diversity, just for redundancy and disaster avoidance type of situations--and that's really what we have in each site.

Our two biggest sites are utilizing DS3 for the MPLS and also for the Internet. And the reason the Internet is DS3 is because by default, all of our offices, depending on where they're located in the country, will either go out of our West Coast office or our East Coast office for Internet access, and for a number of monitoring and filtering reasons, we have it set up that way.

Also, all of the equipment that we have in our sites is provided by Qwest. It's all Cisco gear, and that was all purchased through Qwest as part of the solution, and Qwest can monitor our equipment and really keep us up to date and give us proactive information regarding if there's any equipment issues, problems, or anything of that nature."

7. Customer service

"Customer service has been very good. Obviously, with any type of Internet provider, anybody--whether it's Qwest, Verizon, what have you--there's going to be times where you have issues. And you know, we have had some sites with downages. Most of the time it's been local carrier issues, but there have been a few that have been directly related to a Qwest problem, and we've always had the best experience with them. They take ownership of the problems and they work through with us. Communication's very good, but none of them were ever solved with, say, a single call--you know, you call up and it's done in the next minute. But through their escalation process, once it gets to the appropriate level of person, the problems are usually resolved very quickly. The technical competence of the

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people that we deal with is always very high. Sometimes you have to go through maybe a first tier of support to get to that area, but once you get that person on the line, it's usually resolved very quickly."

8. Non-financial benefits

"The Qwest solution supports our business in a number of ways. I mean, the most important is that we need to be up almost 24x7 now, so it's making sure that it's a dependable solution which, you know, to date it has been. It allows us to basically go about our business and not always have to worry about when you have a new system like the VoIP system. If it's not configured properly, it doesn't work. It creates a lot of inefficiencies. So by going through the whole process with Qwest and getting it implemented correctly, it's allowed us to go about the business of our business, and also the scalability. So when we add, whether it's users in an existing office or adding another office, it's very easy to just get them onto our WAN connection into the same MPLS network. It's very straightforward.

Some of the other benefits are we've had much better performance than we had with our prior solution, and we can see that through network speed has been increased. People have commented that things are working much quicker than they were. We have better alerting and monitoring, so it's more proactive than it was prior. A lot of times with our prior provider, even though we had monitoring, we would have to call them to initiate an issue whereas with Qwest, they either have called us first, or when we called them, they're already aware of the issue. It was really key to allowing our VoIP solution to succeed, and that was critical because of a number of the benefits that we've seen with that, whether it's enabling four-digit dialing between all of our offices, really kind of making for a more cohesive firm. So overall, it's been a really positive experience for us."

9. Measurable benefits

"I guess the first one that comes to mind, as it relates to our voice over IP solution, is it's reduced the long-distance charges we've had due to some of the toll bypass and the ability to directly four-digit dial our other offices across the WAN. Whereas before, if I wanted to call somebody in our West Coast offices, it was always a long-distance call. The overall percentage of savings I think we've seen in our long distance is in the neighborhood of about 40 to 45 percent.

And there's also been, in comparison with our prior solution, less down time. In the same time period with our previous provider, we had three or four times more downtime than we've had with Qwest. Again, it's not perfect, but the downtime we have had has been minimal and with very few exceptions, it's always been fixed very quickly.

And as far as a real hard number along the lines of return on investment, ROI type of thing, we're probably looking at a three to four-year return on investment, and that's really related to reduced long-distance charges and the ability, with our VoIP system, not having to have new systems in each of our offices as we open them up."

10. Areas for improvement

"Overall, I think Qwest has done a very good job. They have their NMS system, which is their network management system, where you can go to the Web and view a lot of your sites and what's going on there. And you know, we've had some issues in the past with some access issues and sometimes some of the sites don't show up in the reports that we run. Some improvement could be done there, and then I know one of the things that we would like to see on that, as well, would be some real-time monitoring, if that would be something that could be done. And I know one of the things that we had been looking into was some of the BGP [border gateway protocol] multipathing which, when we first did this solution, wasn't really ready for rollout yet to the public, and I believe actually we were just informed that that is something coming up, so we'll be taking advantage of that probably in the not-too-distant future. But that was really one of the areas that we had looked for improvement on and they've actually come out with a solution

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to it."

11. Future plans

"We're going to be moving some offices--primarily our Dallas facility is going to be moving--so we're going to be moving our lines there. And, really, in the next 6 to 12 months, it wouldn't surprise me if we either opened another office or increased the amount of bandwidth needed in our existing offices just due to the growth that we've had.

As far as some things that we would be looking for, something new that we're not currently using would be changing over to the BGP multipathing so we could get really an active scenario with our links and eliminate some of the need that we have for GRE [generic routing encapsulation] tunnels and traffic engineering, and really allow us to make our WAN more robust than it is now. So that's something that we're currently exploring, and we'll probably be moving to in the next six months.

And then finally, one of the things that we would be looking at is leveraging the Qwest solution for our DR [disaster recovery] solution that we currently are exploring and implementing, so the WAN would be a big part of replicating data to our DR site and allowing for connectivity should anything happen to our main site."

12. Recommendations and advice

"It was really kind of doing our own homework, trying to make sure that we understood exactly what it was that we needed and expected out of the solution, because there're so many different things out there that each carrier can offer, and really, depending on your needs, determine which carrier you would need over another. It doesn't always come down to a pure cost analysis. So it's really knowing what you need, whether it be scalability, redundancy, or security. Those are the kind of the three main areas that we looked at.

For us, with the MPLS, it was critical that we knew what the design was right down to what each hop on the network was, because we would have a couple of issues that were--maybe there was a problem and it turns out it was maybe at one site they had a Juniper router whereas we had a Cisco, so we had to do some changes on the routing so they would talk properly. So it's really getting nitty-gritty with knowing what's from end to end; it's not just, okay, knowing what you have in your New Jersey office and what you have in your Beverly Hills office.

And then finally with looking at MPLS and the QoS [quality of service], it's really setting realistic levels on the QoS and also being sure that you stress test the system to make sure that the QoS is implemented properly and kicks in as appropriate. It's one thing to design it, but really running it through its paces is critical, so that should that ever kick in at a busy time of year, you're not caught by surprise."