

## CASE STUDY

# Landmark Implement Drives Growth in American Heartland



### At a Glance

**Industry:**

Agriculture equipment, service

**Challenge:**

Build long-term IT strategy for equipment sales, service in rural areas

**Solution:**

Establish MPLS backbone and layer VoIP, colocation, cloud on top



In 2006, Landmark Implement was formed through the merger of four John Deere equipment dealers in Nebraska and Kansas. Today, Landmark is one of the leading John Deere dealers in the nation, specializing in customer service and a full range of new and used gear and service. Landmark also operates an irrigation and grain handling business offering products and services for watering fields and moving grains after harvest.

The business has grown over the years through acquisition. It now operates 17 locations in addition to its headquarters. The IT department serves 450 users in two states and has to be prepared for further growth and new locations. Each Landmark location is a combination of sales operations and field service center as well as a local outpost for the John Deere brand of farm equipment. Communication with customers, among employees and with John Deere is critical to the business. Since these locations do not have their own IT staff, they rely on support from Landmark headquarters to stay connected. The rural nature of many of the locations poses unique challenges in connectivity, consistency and performance for the overall IT operation.

## Challenge

### Establishing a unified IT strategy to manage growth

Landmark started from a merger and grew through further acquisitions. Yet, over the years, the company had not developed a real IT strategy for pulling these sites into a single operation. Newly acquired offices brought multiple vendors, multiple transport types and varying levels of network performance. Centralized applications had no consistency and it was difficult to rein in costs as they attempted to stitch things together with technologies such as frame relay over leased lines.

Amid this increasing complexity in the field, John Deere also raised its expectations of IT capability among its leading dealers in the Large Ag Sector where Landmark plays. Those dealers present a channel through which Deere can increase service, support and gain better market intelligence through new applications and better online communication with its top dealers who are working with the buyers of Deere equipment every day.

Landmark hired Brian Martin as director of IT to address these related challenges and opportunities. Martin started with two basic principles.

“We needed unification of the various sites into a single integrated operation and increased efficiency across that unified business,” Martin said. “The only thing to drive that kind of unification and efficiency is a better communication infrastructure.”

Martin looked at different options available in these rural locations such as multiple T1 lines. But, many of the proposals were piecemeal solutions of a different kind. They were expensive and didn’t offer the kind of voice and data performance and flexibility that he wanted to use to lay the foundations of his more integrated efficient organization.

He also wanted to shrink the number of vendors involved in his network so he could drive efficiency through guaranteed uptime without different vendors pointing fingers at each other. He was also looking to the future with a long-term plan to move to unified communications for field personnel and a shift to the cloud for his data center needs.

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Brian Martin – Director of IT

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## Solution

### MPLS backbone lays foundation for long-term IT strategy, growth

CenturyLink was already providing phone service to Landmark, so Martin and CenturyLink began working on a long-range plan to not only upgrade phone capabilities, but to establish an IT strategy that would scale with Landmark’s growth plans. They created a plan that moved in stages over the course of months to spread out costs and so that Martin could demonstrate to management the benefits in each stage.

Martin and CenturyLink replaced his frame relay system with a CenturyLink MPLS network that serves as a backbone for the operation. MPLS now connects all 18 locations across Nebraska and Kansas including the company headquarters, bringing the unification that Martin sought. The first step toward increased efficiency was moving the phone service to CenturyLink Hosted VoIP over that MPLS network. By moving to a digital phone service, Landmark was able to start integrating voice and data in the local sites and create greater collaboration across the company.

With that network upgrade in place, Martin also moved his core data center into a CenturyLink Colocation arrangement. That allowed Martin to implement Network Based Security to protect his operation. The collocated systems also run his core internal services such as Microsoft Sharepoint and e-mail.

More recently, Martin added CenturyLink Cloud to deploy an app-based mobile strategy. As a new part of the business, the mobile app presented an opportunity for Martin to add the cloud to Landmark’s IT strategy, opening possibilities for the future because of the more flexible resources available through dedicated compute and storage.

In an immediate sense, though, adding mobility is particularly important for Landmark’s growing operation because of the field-intensive, seasonal nature of the business. It empowers farmers to interact with Landmark in real time when they are in harvest or planting modes. Likewise, it also makes technicians more efficient on service calls during those all-important seasons.

## Results

### Cost savings, leading-edge reputation in Deere dealer network

Landmark is on track to save \$70,000 a year just on their phone bill. The business is operating at a level of efficiency that it has never seen previously.

“Our employees now live in a technology world they never dreamed of before,” Martin said. “We are on track to raise performance, increase bandwidth and lower costs even further.”

Martin said CenturyLink offered a Service Level Agreement that no other vendor could touch serving the rural areas where his facilities are located. And that reliability has driven growth in all phases of the business from product sales and leasing to service.

“We can now service customers 24/7,” Martin said. “That’s especially crucial at harvest time. We were never in a position to give them that reliability before.”

Landmark now pilots some of John Deere’s applications as their relationship has grown tighter because of the IT upgrade. Martin gets calls from other John Deere dealers around the country asking how they built the IT infrastructure they now have.

“There are other dealers asking for our ‘secret sauce,’” Martin said.

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Brian Martin – Director of IT

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## Future

### Unified Communications, SD-WAN drive growth

Landmark and CenturyLink are working on a proof of concept for an SD-WAN deployment. That eventual capability will add greater efficiency, security and control for this growing network-based business.

Unified Communication is also planned to enhance the level of customer service during those all-important planting and harvest seasons. That will create another increment of growth.

“If you miss that call, you miss that sale,” Martin said. “We have to be in total communication with our customers.”

Unified Communication is part of Martin’s long-term IT vision for increased mobility for this business built in the rural areas of America’s heartland.

“Our mobile future is going to be a big overhaul,” Martin said. “But we’re confident because of our relationship with CenturyLink.”

#### Global Headquarters

Monroe, LA  
(800) 784-2105

#### EMEA Headquarters

United Kingdom  
+44 (0)118 322 6000

#### Asia Pacific Headquarters

Singapore  
+65 6768 8098

#### Canada Headquarters

Toronto, ON  
1-877-387-3764