

MAC DONALD ISLAND PARK



CASE STUDY

SWITCHVOX

Situated in the Boreal Forest at the confluence of three rivers in Alberta Canada, Fort McMurray is an oil rich boomtown of 120,000 people. At its city center sits MacDonald Island Park, Canada's largest community recreational, leisure, and social center. In spite of the city's growing economy, the region is glaringly devoid of technology companies and the hi-tech services those companies provide. This missing component has made it difficult for the park to implement an effective IP telephony solution. Mac Island had purchased and partially implemented four different telephone systems, anchored by a Mitel Allstream PBX; yet they still had a reputation among their patrons as having the worst telephone system in Canada, rife with dropped calls and commonly landing in a non-ending loop when on hold.

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A Digium Switchvox UC Solution That is So Easy, Mac Island Park Implemented it Themselves for 30% of the Cost of Competitors

Part of the problem was that the closest big box telephony vendors are located 300 miles away. No telecom company would guarantee technical and customer service support, a parts replacement contract, or a maintenance agreement to keep the system working properly from four hours away. That is, not until IT director Jason Carlson found the Digium Switchvox UC solution — a phone system that was easy to use and that he could set up and manage on his own, with online or telephone support available when needed.

Carlson saw the opening he needed to recommend a new telephone solution, only this time, he would build it himself.

A year prior, Carlson received a \$125,000 quote from Cisco and a \$100,000 quote from Avaya to replace the Mitel and its cobbled-together components. With the closest support hours away, he was again unable to secure any support guarantees or justify the costs. "I don't want to say I was under any pressure, but considering the wasted efforts of the past, and no funding set aside for a new system, let's just say there was no room to risk another mistake!" he admits.

Funded by the government and managed as a nonprofit Part IX corporation by the MacDonald Island Park Corporation, Mac Island features a variety of arts and cultural activities, meeting venues, an aquatic center, a climbing wall, and outdoor field sports like squash, football, and baseball. Earlier this year, the park received final approval for a major expansion project to include a 440,000 square-foot recreational facility and mega sports complex to house winter sports favorites like curling and ice-skating. The expansion would also include a golf course, with future aspirations for another facility in Edmonton.

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Challenges

Mac Island purchased an MTS Allstream system in 2009, shortly after Mitel bought them.

"The system was never installed properly and we could never get the voicemail programmed correctly," Carlson says. "Furthermore, the calls never showed up anywhere in the system so we couldn't even return lost calls. If the call wasn't answered on the third ring, it would go into a permanent loop and was eventually lost. Neither Allstream nor Mitel would respond to calls for assistance.

"It isn't possible to overstate the poor condition of the Mitel and the bad reputation Mac Island had for our phone service," Carlson says. "Customers constantly complained about getting cut off or being put permanently on hold when transferred to another department. When I opened the closet where the main unit resided to see if a quick inspection would lend any clues as to how to fix it, I found it covered in drywall dust. A quick inspection told me the hardware was on borrowed time."

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Carlson had a long history working with Linux operating systems and was familiar with the open source concept, although he had never installed a telephone system. "I know it sounds ambitious but I decided I would install Linux with Asterisk by Digium, and build a system myself. Digium's closest reseller was also five hours away so I called Digium headquarters. That's when I learned about Digium Switchvox."

Switchvox Solutions

As Carlson discovered, Switchvox runs on Asterisk software, but it provides an all-inclusive UC solution so he wouldn't have to build a system from scratch at all. "First of all, Digium quotes their Switchvox differently from other vendors. They want to know how many users, how many need email, VM, mobile, etcetera, unlike the other systems I checked into like AT&T, Nortel, Cisco, and Toshiba whose pricing is license-based. If those numbers are one or two off, then you are hit with additional costs and as you add to the system, the price continues to go up.

Digium walked Carlson through a demo of the system and offered to have the closest Digium reseller in Alberta contact him. Carlson felt confident he could implement the system himself and didn't want to be dependent on anyone but Digium's support team.

"Also, Switchvox is expandable, which means that at 147 users currently, we can add up to 400 users as we open more facilities." Carlson said the other thing that got his attention was Switchvox's pre-configuration. "With the other systems, I was going to have to write all the routing rules for voicemail and that was a lot of work. With Switchvox, I just have to go into a screen, click and unclick check boxes next to the features and rule sets I want. Then, I plugged in the IP phones and they find the software themselves."

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Carlson bought the entire Digium Switchvox SMB355 system with nearly 150 IP phones for \$46,500; and, Digium helped Carlson find a buyer for the old Mitel, bringing the cost down to \$35,000. Compared to Cisco's \$125,000 price tag, Switchvox with its flexibility and ease of use, feature-rich UC functionality, and all-inclusive packaging is less than 30% of the cost of Cisco.

Avaya too had offered Carlson a demo and he says they contacted him to see how they could negotiate the price to make it competitive. "We get about 1,200 calls a day. The solution has to be seamless. If I go on vacation, the staff can run diagnostic reports from the Switchvox control panel to troubleshoot the problem. Avaya could offer nothing to make them competitive. When you have to start from a command line prompt, as you do with their system, in order to troubleshoot a problem, it is too hard for anyone except an advanced level technician."



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