

ZEPHYR REAL ESTATE



CASE STUDY

SWITCHVOX

Back in 1978, when San Francisco's Zephyr Real Estate first opened their doors, there were few options for business telephone systems. As Zephyr began to grow and open new locations, analog technology did not allow for seamless connectivity between offices, mobility, and people. Callers often experienced inconveniences, such as accidentally reaching the wrong office or having to call multiple numbers to reach a specific agent. Even as phone systems advanced, Zephyr Real Estate realized it is not always easy for a growing SMB to keep pace with evolving technologies — until they discovered the power, affordability, and ease of operations that come with Unified Communications (UC).

\$1.5 Billion Real Estate Firm Unifies Seven San Francisco Bay Area Offices with a Digium Switchvox UC Solution

Today, Zephyr Real Estate is San Francisco's largest independent real estate company with 250 agents in seven offices scattered across the Bay area. Focused primarily on luxury residential properties, the company boasts annual revenues of \$1.5 billion. Until this past year, Zephyr was still operating a hodgepodge communications system made up of seven disparate analog telephone systems. Early last year, Zephyr Real Estate upgraded to a more cohesive and flexible UC solution and the system they chose was Digium's Switchvox, powered by Asterisk.

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IT Director,
Zephyr Real Estate**

The Challenge

When Hud Bixler joined Zephyr Real Estate as IT Director in 2006, he started by building a solid data network to connect all seven offices, but he soon realized the existing switches could not handle both voice and data traffic. He focused on upgrading individual telecom systems at their larger offices, building a couple of the systems from scratch using Centrix, but they were all analog-based. "The phone system was Calamity Jane," he says, "One office had an NEC system and I had never managed an NEC before. Another office had two gigantic towers just sitting in the middle of the room. It was the phone system and it was scary!"

Early last year, Bixler was ready to consolidate the seven systems into a bulletproof VoIP system with Unified Communications capabilities. "It took us about six months of research and we looked at a lot of options," he says. "Cost was an important factor, but quality was an issue as well. We went into it favoring a ShoreTel system because it came recommended by an affiliated real estate firm. We set up a ShoreTel demo and it seemed to work well, but the process got very convoluted with their proprietary equipment and licensing. The costs just kept escalating until it looked like we were facing between \$250,000 and \$300,000 the first year and about half that annually, which seemed like overkill with all their proprietary requirements."

Fortunately, Bixler's research had uncovered an alternative: Asterisk. Known worldwide as a powerful open source telecom platform that is easy to integrate with other software applications, Asterisk is sponsored by Digium, and powers Switchvox UC. "I know open source is much less expensive than big box brands and I trust the technology to be solid and flexible," Bixler says. "I knew we would receive a nice set of features with an Asterisk-based system because it was designed specifically so you can customize a telephone system to your needs. What I didn't know was that Digium has packaged Asterisk into a highly flexible all-inclusive Switchvox PBX appliance with a price point that is manageable and an implementation process that is very straight forward."

The Solution

Zephyr Real Estate contacted Resource Telecom, a registered Digium reseller in the San Francisco Bay area, specializing in business telephone systems for offices with 25 to 250 desktop users. "We were very pleased with the Switchvox demo. Comparatively speaking, we were looking at about \$150,000 in upfront Digium Switchvox equipment and installation costs the first year, which was more than we originally planned, but I could swallow the costs since in the long term, we would be looking at a savings of \$45,000 to \$50,000 a year."

A new web-based VoIP business communications system would require building an infrastructure to support it, but Resource Telecom worked closely with Bixler and his team. "We completely overhauled and rebuilt the network architecture," he says. One of the locations, a building built in 1906 and converted into office space in the 1980s when it was re-wired, was insufficient to support VoIP or Power over Ethernet (PoE). "We had to replace all our old switches with Cisco PoE switches, and Resource Telecom built and set up the call queues according to each office manager's request. "One of the things all our office managers liked is how flexible Switchvox is. Each office has different call rules, different hours of operation, different weekend and evening hours, and different call distribution. There were many phone numbers and it took a couple of weeks at each location to port all those numbers one at a time before deployment."

Zephyr Real Estate purchased two powerful, full-featured, server-based SMB 305 appliances supporting up to 150 users and 45 concurrent calls and installed them at Zephyr's two largest locations. They

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installed two networks, one for data, and the other for VoIP. They currently have four PRIs but Bixler expects to downsize to only one or two PRIs, which saves another \$500 per PRI, per month.

“Our timing was perfect when it came to phone sets too,” he says. Digium launched their new business IP phones about the time Zephyr was getting ready to make the purchase. “When we discovered these phones were designed as an integral part of the Switchvox system, we knew they were the right choice.” The software updates are available as service packs so that when you reboot the phones, it updates the whole system automatically without having to program them manually.” According to Bixler, the administrative panel on the web interface makes it easy to make changes and then push it out to the phones. “Anyone who has ever had to program each individual phone using a phone menu knows how grueling that is. We are talking about 220 phones, so you can imagine how time consuming and tedious that would have been.”

Results

Zephyr Real Estate is experiencing a great deal of reliability resulting from their new Switchvox implementation. With the old systems, the POT lines often had a lot of static. The voicemail crashed often and the old wiring in the building made it difficult to track down and solve problems. They experimented with a hosted SIP solution at one of their smaller offices but analysis proved the volume of voice traffic and call quality was not sufficient for the larger office environment. “I feel we will move towards a full SIP solution in the long run but right now we aren’t quite ready to take SIP to the next level.”

Bixler says one of the biggest and most welcomed changes with the new Switchvox is the dial through system — the ability to go right into contacts and transfer calls from office-to-office or office-to-cell phones. Today, real estate agents are more mobile than ever and they have only just started digging into the Switchvox toolbox for features like the Switchvox mobile app. “We have been up and working for about six months so we are eating plain vanilla right now: voicemail to fax and voicemail to email. We haven’t even begun to investigate the full potential of the reporting capabilities or many other features.”

Future expansion has proven to be another benefit of Switchvox’s flexibility. Zephyr Real Estate has an associated company that has their headquarters in one of Zephyr’s office buildings. “When they moved in November, they were going to install their own telecom system. They have only 12 employees in that office, so we made an arrangement in which we added them to our Switchvox system. They have their own caller ID on one of our PRIs so they operate as a separate company off our system — proof that if we need to add new locations in the future, with just a little work, Switchvox can handle it,” says Bixler.



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