

FIDM opens doors to student success with IBM Lotus

Overview

Challenge

Provide improved communication and fast, anytime access to administrative and learning tools on a platform that can scale quickly to handle spikes in traffic.

The Solution

Unified messaging through IBM Power Systems IP Telephony from 3Com and portals based on IBM WebSphere Portal Enable connect users to critical information and applications.

Benefits

- Unified messaging has helped make it easier to communicate quickly while reducing voice costs
 - As much as 50 percent faster application deployment lets the school quickly deliver new features
 - High-performance scalability supports registration and grading peaks
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The work of graduates from the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM) in California can be seen on red carpets, movie sets, TV shows and magazine covers around the world. The institute's reputation for design excellence resulted in the producers of *Project Runway* choosing it as ground central for season six of the highly popular TV show.

As a highly specialized private college with more than 7,500 students, FIDM relies on technology to offer unique curricula that help prepare students for a marketplace that is always thinking one fashion season ahead. Working with IBM, the institute has developed a rich, integrated suite of hardware and software solutions that enables it to meet the needs of the industries it serves, while focusing on its core mission of providing an educational environment that fuses student desires with career realities. "We in the IT department view ourselves as a catalyst for change," explains CIO Roxanne Reynolds-Lair. "When we see an interesting capability that will benefit our students or staff, we research potential solutions and then make the business case to our administration."

FIDM unifies communications with VoIP

One of the technologies being followed by Reynolds-Lair's staff was Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephony. "We knew that IP telephony had the potential to reduce our voice network costs and enable new services." With six locations in California, wide-area telecommunications costs were high. At the same time, the college's existing telephone system had reached its capacity and maintenance



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—Roxanne Reynolds-Lair, CIO, The Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising



costs were increasing. The cost of a VoIP deployment would be easy to justify, simply because routing voice traffic over a multiprotocol label switching network could dramatically cut costs compared to the current voice network.

Besides reducing telecommunications costs, Reynolds-Lair had a vision of how voice communications could enhance other IT applications to better serve students and staff. Students could use “click-to-talk” functions to speak to someone right away instead of simply e-mailing the staff. Prospective students browsing the college’s Web site could use voice capabilities to talk directly to an admissions advisor, which could positively impact how the college is perceived by potential students—and perhaps improve recruiting.

Unified messaging—where voice, e-mail and fax communications are accessed through a single integrated application—could help boost productivity for students and staff. Faxes can be delivered to users’ computers. Voicemail messages can be e-mailed as attachments. Employees can have their phone calls, faxes and e-mails sent to their PDAs. Says Reynolds-Lair, “Unified messaging features can help our

Solution Components

Software

- IBM WebSphere® Portal
- IBM Lotus® Domino®
- IBM Lotus Notes®
- IBM Lotus Quickr™
- IBM Lotus Sametime®
- IBM Lotus Web Content Management

Hardware

- IBM Power® 570

Business Partner

- Zobrist Consulting Group
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staff be more productive because they can make it easier to communicate important information quickly. Unified messaging could also make it easier for users to select the best means of communication for a given task—improving the quality of such interactions.”

Transition to IP telephony is simple and fast

Because the new telephone system required new SIP telephone sets, the IT department needed a deployment plan that transitioned the entire college in one step. “There was no way to slowly transition to VoIP. We had to switch from our previous wide area network (WAN) to an IP-based network; and we needed to replace nearly 600 phones with SIP phones. We started the deployment first thing on a Saturday morning,” says Reynolds-Lair. “We were prepared to work around the clock through Sunday, but the 3Com software installation went so smoothly that we were completely done by Saturday evening at 8 p.m. IBM, 3Com and our IT staff did a wonderful job. We added an IBM® System i® 520 platform as backup for the IP telephony system. And through the entire deployment process, all the normal IBM i applications continued to function without a hiccup. I have never seen a large-scale deployment go so smoothly.”

VoIP telephony delivers significant telecommunications cost reduction

Routing voice traffic over an intercampus IP network cut WAN costs significantly compared to the previous network, which has resulted in a payback period of just two years.

Other benefits have come from the telecommuter module of the 3Com system, used to connect remote workers to the college’s internal phone system. Now, employees can dial an internal four-digit extension to reach their remote colleagues. “It’s just like they are here in the office,” says Reynolds-Lair, “which makes them easily accessible. We’re also saving costs by having those people on the IP network.”

Perhaps most importantly, unified communications allow FIDM to better serve its students. “Students can click to call the admissions advisor and there’s workflow routing behind the scenes so calls go to available advisors,” Reynolds-Lair says. “It’s a very sophisticated and tightly integrated application. Nobody is wasting time on hold or being transferred to the wrong department.”

FIDM connects students and staff with critical tools

As FIDM's reputation and enrollment grew, IT staff also began looking for ways to move time-consuming administration tasks, such as registration and transcript requests, to the Web. Initially the school tried an open source portal solution to enable student self-service, but the product didn't scale easily and performance during peak enrollment times was very unreliable, frustrating students and staff and draining valuable IT resources.

Since FIDM had already standardized on an IBM platform and was highly familiar—and satisfied—with its existing IBM Lotus® Domino®, IBM Lotus Notes® 8 and WebSphere® application environment, Reynolds-Lair decided to evaluate the option of implementing WebSphere Portal. “An exceptional user experience is crucial to us so students can easily and quickly navigate through the system and not have to phone support if the system is too slow or they can't get in,” she says. “We decided WebSphere Portal could help us move forward into the future because it can provide convenient access to our existing solutions, and it addressed all of our concerns around security, scalability and long-term maintenance.”

Zobrist Consulting lends expertise to deployment

FIDM decided to use an IBM system integrator, Zobrist Consulting, to help with the integration of WebSphere Portal Enable and to guide the FIDM development team on customized components, which included a plug-in for student payments and a customized user interface. “Thanks to Zobrist's expertise, we were able to work on integration and custom development in parallel—and reduce the overall deployment time,” Reynolds-Lair says.

The total implementation process, including customizations and data migration, took less than six months. “At no time was anyone without service,” Reynolds-Lair explains. “We created an internal employee portal first, and then a new student portal to replace the previous solution. Now we can easily scale both portals and add new applications as we grow.”

Two portals provide services for diverse user groups

Known as the FIDM Portal, the student portal provides up-to-date and organized information on different areas of the college, such as academics, finance, the library and the career center. This portal helps students quickly find relevant information and use time-saving Web applications for tasks such as registration, applying for housing and checking grades. The homepage provides students with the latest FIDM news and acts as a hub to other areas.

For staff and faculty, a separate portal provides access to custom Web applications, including the Lotus Web Content Management system, and applications for transcript inquiry, registration, admissions, class scheduling and student messaging. These capabilities help boost productivity by streamlining employee tasks in a centralized, easy-to-use interface.

“We created both portals according to role-based divisions,” Reynolds-Lair explains. “The student portal services our current students, prospective students and alumni. Secure access is granted based on a student’s academic status in our IBM DB2® database and relies on a credential vault to authenticate. Prospective students will only see certain portlets, whereas current students will see the full range of needed applications. The employee portal follows a more traditional role-based access plan based on job description and functions required and allows single sign-on with secure authentication and authorization.”

Innovative services boost efficiency

WebSphere Portal also enables FIDM to provide additional services and applications that help improve communications and collaboration across the school’s Los Angeles, San Francisco, Orange County and San Diego campuses. Using IBM WebSphere Portlet Factory, IT staff created an online contact form accessed through the portal that a student can use to e-mail questions directly to a specific FIDM department.

The portals also use a number of out-of-the-box portlets, including RSS, Web Clipping, Web Portlet and Information Portlet.

Applications consisting of several portlets can be installed and removed using the portal administration interface while the portal server is running and the settings of a portlet can be changed by an administrator without stopping or restarting the portal server Web application, helping to ensure services are available when students need them. “The portal has become the strategic framework for everything we do,” Reynolds-Lair says. “For instance, we pull in RSS news feeds that are applicable to the industries we serve and help keep students up to date on fashion, design and entertainment news.”

In addition to the portal, staff across four campuses uses IBM Lotus Quickr™ software for collaboration in the form of document sharing, blogs and wikis. “Each department has chosen its unique priorities, and while they all want to do document file sharing and collaboration, some of them are excited about calendars, while others want to focus on blogs,” Reynolds-Lair explains. “Quickr also facilitates a number of processes including a weekly project summary and update, project deployment scheduling and asset tracking.”

To keep the portal content updated, more than 60 staff members now access the Lotus Web Content Management system through the portal. “Nontechnical staff maintains most of the static and PDF documents available on the portal, while IT maintains the custom Web applications,” Reynolds-Lair says. “It only takes about 30 minutes to train users, and we have eliminated the previous lengthy process so students can get critical information as soon as possible. Meanwhile, our IT technical staff is freed up to focus on bigger tasks.”

Automated processes reduce waste and free IT resources

Automating processes through the portals has resulted in a huge productivity boost for FIDM. The school now takes payments for tuition, study tours and housing through the portal—previously manual and time-consuming processes. “As more students come from out of state and need housing, they can now apply through the portal, make their housing payments, receive roommate referrals and choose where they’d

like to live,” Reynolds-Lair says. “And we have a back-end system on the portal to help staff administer each program. There’s less paper wasted, we’ve cut the number of hours spent on manual processing and we can provide much improved service to a very technology-savvy student base.”

As a result of deploying the two portals, FIDM has been able to reduce the time to deploy new applications by 50 percent, even as demand for these applications increases daily. “All of our 8,600 users—our students, our staff and our faculty—can grow the way they need to grow and we’re not locked into a cookie-cutter product,” Reynolds-Lair says. “We can develop technology solutions that match the culture of the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising. More than 96 percent of our students now rely on the portal to access relevant information, and we are continuing to develop new applications as needs evolve. IBM WebSphere Portal has shined the spotlight on flexibility at an optimized cost as well as scalability for the future.”

For more information

For more information on IBM Lotus collaboration tools, please contact your IBM sales representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit ibm.com/lotus

For more information on IBM Power Systems™ solutions, please contact your IBM sales representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit ibm.com/power

For more information about the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising, visit www.fidm.edu



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