

Technology transforming business: the eir experience



Information is the lifeblood of most organisations and the ability to access, share and store information is critical to their success. A reliable, well-managed network will often be a key building block in achieving a robust approach to the management and sharing of information

Business background

In the middle of the last decade, the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) embarked on an ambitious programme of reform and change. This includes the development of a shared service approach to replace the model whereby every department had its own independent systems for finance, human resources, records management and IT.

The overarching goal of the initiative was to eliminate unnecessary duplication and ensure consistently high levels of service – both internally within the organisation and outwardly to the citizen. To support this programme, the NICS set out a ten-year investment in communications technology and services: to provide a solid basis for the new structure, followed by a flexible platform layered on top – one capable of meeting the objectives of the shared service programme and of adapting to the newly reformed public service

Facing challenges

The first phase of the project involved setting up a managed wide area network (WAN), dubbed 'Network NI'. Previously, departments had their own networks which could result in shared buildings having separate WAN connections for each department using the building. Moreover, the links were not always based on common technology or protocols.

"Before Network NI we had a series of network connections across buildings," explains Barry Lowry, Director of IT Services, within the Enterprise Shared Services Directorate at NICS. "There was no centralised ownership for the bulk of these connections. There was also considerable duplication of connections which were more expensive than they should have been and the bandwidth wasn't always fit for purpose. The purpose of Network NI was to establish a common network with economies of scale to invest more money on more bandwidth, more resilience and a better overall service."

It was agreed that a shared solution was necessary to achieve the desired outcomes and the requirement was taken through the EU tendering process. The initial deal for Network NI was scheduled to begin in 2007, lasting for six years until September 2013.

Phase Two

After the consolidated network had been implemented, the next stage of the project brought additional elements into play. The ability to install IP telephony would not have been possible without Network NI as the underlying infrastructure, but a new phone system was needed because the existing PABX system was coming to end of life.

eir Business NI replaced the ageing analogue platform with a range of Cisco technologies including Cisco Unified Call Manager, Gateways, Cisco Agent Desktop, Network switches, IP phones and Voice Recording. At the end of 2012, 14,000 users across 88 sites had been migrated onto the new platform. By the time it will be completed in 2013, this project will represent the largest single deployment of IP telephony on the island of Ireland – some 20,000 seats.

Money saved

Lowry hails the "fantastic achievement" in delivering both the Network NI infrastructure and the IP telephony platform that sits on top of it. The first part of consolidating close to 300 buildings on to a single network was a considerable challenge, he says, but eir Business NI delivered the project three months ahead of schedule and within budget. It resulted in the cost per megabit being cut in half – a significant saving for the taxpayer.

The term 'delivering value for money' is often misused but in the case of Network NI, that's exactly what happened. Before the contract had run its course, something unusual occurred: the NICS got its money back. That was due to eir Business NI unique approach to the project, says Darren Lemon, General Manager of eir Business NI. "We went back and designed the network in year four of the contract to take advantage of new products and services that became available. We redesigned the network to take advantage of the new technologies and we gave £750,000 back to the client in savings. No telecoms company typically does that," he states.

The contract also included a volume discount mechanism. "As more public sector organisations

choose to join the network, the running costs for each individual department are reduced," adds Lemon. In all, more than 20 public sector bodies, covering 120 additional sites, have since been added to the Network including organisations with different security classifications such as IL2, IL3 and IL4.

Network NI has enabled all of the NICS' buildings throughout Northern Ireland to be connected across a single infrastructure. It is the essential bedrock that supports IP telephony technology, which allows civil service workers to set up at their nearest location – wherever they happen to be – and have their number follow them, therefore being always available and constantly in contact with colleagues and citizens.

Continuity

The IP telephony infrastructure has considerably improved the capacity of the NICS to manage disaster recovery and business continuity. This was vividly illustrated when the Stormont Estate lost much of its power supply to flash floods in June 2012 and Dundonald House, which houses a number of government departments, had to be evacuated.

"We were able to relocate several hundred staff, carrying their numbers with them. The public didn't see any noticeable difference in service. The business impact was managed and hugely limited by the fact that those departments were relocated and running so quickly, and IP telephony was a critical part of that. If we hadn't had IP telephony we couldn't have relocated all those staff," says Lowry.

"What really appealed to me about eir Business NI was they were as committed to making these big projects a success as we were. I've found the best thing about working with eir is that we don't fall out over issues, we work them out and we move on and the relationship has been very successful. There's substantial trust. Our focus has always been about making the achievements, ensuring milestones were achieved and the benefits realised."

Barry Lowry, Director of IT Services, ESS,
Northern Ireland Civil Service

Summary

Ultimately, Lowry says the project delivers what every citizen likes to see: their tax money being invested wisely in ongoing improvement of services. "We really hope that by using technology in an innovative way, we will be able to hugely reduce the costs of running the civil service and maximise the amount of taxpayers' money on services." NICS' shared services programme, and the technology that underpins it, has been widely praised by independent IT industry analyst Gartner.

Northern Ireland Civil Service's strong partnership with eir Business NI is evident: the Network NI contract has already been extended to 2015, and it has the option of being extended for a further two years beyond that date.

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"We both put our best people into the project and planned it really well and we also took care of the 'soft' aspects as well as the technical aspects. That involved communication and building confidence among the staff. That's one of the reasons why the project was such a success."

To find out more about how eir Business NI can help your organisation



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