

Seine River School division embraces innovative phone system

For a rural Manitoba school division using decades-old phone technology, making the move to IP phones was a no-brainer – especially when a hosted system could save money, while adding new features and functionality for staff and faculty. It's also providing new ways to communicate, such as paging parents over their smartphones if a school bus is running late.

The challenges of an outdated phone system

As the Information Technology Manager with the Seine River School Division in Lorette, Manitoba, Don Driver was faced with an uphill battle. When he first joined the school district, Driver inherited legacy Nortel phones that were 20 to 30 years old, and it was now time to bring that system into a modern era.

“I was looking at an obsolete system, with one installation per school and a set number of phones that couldn't be expanded after that,” said Driver. “The phones still worked, but because they were obsolete we couldn't guarantee how many years we could go forward.”

Fortunately, in 2014 the province introduced legislation that would allow school boards to enter cost-sharing agreements to build or enhance Internet service to schools. That allowed the Seine River School Division to partner with Bell MTS to install fibre across the division, which has 4200 students and supports schools within a 150-kilometre radius.



The enhanced Internet access provided a foundation to build out better phone services. “We then decided we needed a new phone system because we had that fibre connection,” Driver explained, and with his IT staff of five he knew the challenges ahead to replace the phone communications for all their locations. “Staff is limited and we’d have to hire somebody to manage the phone system,” said Driver. “Our infrastructure was good, but our data centre was not good enough to attempt this. We’d have to do a lot of upgrading of our core infrastructure.”

The question was – should they do it themselves or should they turn to a hosted service provider?

Finding the right solution and business partner

For the Seine River School Division, it made sense to turn to a trusted hosted service provider. Driver considered several options, but in the end went with Bell MTS, which also runs the school division’s fibre connections.

“It was a natural fit for us. The phone system uses the Bell MTS infrastructure and connects right to the Bell MTS Data Centre,” Driver explained. He also liked the fact that Cisco, which provides the Hosted Collaboration Solution (HCS), was at the table with Bell MTS, providing a one-stop solution.

Training and ongoing support

The team rolled out the solution slowly – two schools per month, over the course of six months. That’s where training and support became a big benefit to Driver and his IT staff.

Bell MTS spent a day at each school to provide user training. “We had to do some infrastructure work with our switches to allow VoIP to work, but during the actual cutover the school was only out of service for about five minutes,” said Driver. “It went pretty smoothly for taking a 25-year-old system and migrating to something new, especially being out in the country where there’s not a lot available.”

Driver also likes the fact that his team doesn’t have to worry about software upgrades or troubleshooting. “We have a help desk so if anybody has an issue we pass it along to Bell MTS,” he explained. Driver and his team also have a direct line to a customer support manager at Bell MTS. “I have his number if I have any questions, and he calls us if there’s an issue that he thinks might be affecting us. Bell MTS has put time and effort into customer service and quality of service.”

Saving money

The hosted solution also turned out to be much more cost-effective than an on-premises solution. “The infrastructure cost for servers and cooling would have been huge – and unpredictable,” said Driver. “Those costs would have soared. And to hire somebody specifically to manage Cisco phones didn’t make sense either.”

With the hosted solution, each phone costs a flat per-month fee and offers features such as four-digit calling throughout the division.

Incredible features for staff and parents

But it wasn't just about cutting costs, as the school division began to recognize the advanced functionality their new system could offer.

✓ Enhancing an outdated PA system

Staff also like the versatility of the new phone system, which provides call forwarding, group calling and IP paging. "As our PA systems get older we can use the phone system as an IP paging system," said Driver. "We tried it at our transportation department and it works really well for us. And if you want to page just principals, you can do that."

✓ Voicemails via email

Staff now have voice-to-email capabilities, so they can access their voicemail via their laptop. "The admins just love that – they can get their voice messages without having to call in," he said. Secretaries now have Bluetooth headsets, so they're no longer tied to their desk, and if they need to find a student or go to the photocopier room, they can stay connected.

✓ Announcements on parents' smartphones

"In the future this will offer us more methods to communicate with parents," said Driver. "For example, if the bus is late, the phone system may act as an announcement system to parents' smartphones."

The school division is now looking at other ways to improve communications and provide new, innovative features for faculty, students and even parents, without any disruption to the operation of the schools.

"It allowed us to upgrade from an obsolete system to a new IP system with little staffing or internal cost," said Driver. "It's a lot more flexible and we've had very positive feedback from staff."

