

# Speak to me

Showtime, one of the region's largest satellite broadcasters, has upgraded its contact centre systems to a voice over IP solution from Avaya. NME looks at how the firm plans to leverage the system.

Showtime is one of the main players in the satellite television arena, and over the past year the company has embarked on an ambitious plan to boost its share of the market. Part of this has revolved around relaunching its channel packages – and crucially securing rights to the English Football Association (FA) Premier League, one of the most sought-after prizes in pay-TV.

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Another major plank in Showtime's strategy has been to make sure its customer service is up to scratch, not only in terms of developing and training its contact centre staff, but also its technology. The company decided to upgrade its Dubai and Cairo contact centres in 2005, and wanted to bring in a converged IP-based system to offer the latest features.

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Showtime's vice president of operations, Steven MacDiarmid, explains how the broadcaster's programming and infrastructure strategies came together: "The FA Premier League is fabulous news for the programming team, and for the sales guys – when you get to the guy who runs operations, the question is 'how on earth are we going to deal with this?'"

"This is the most important football league in the world, it's the most watched – it's going to attract a lot of attention. And it will bring

extreme peaks of activity. We have interactive applications, and suddenly at 7pm – it's Manchester United and Chelsea about to kick off, and tens of thousands of your customers want to interact with you. The investment in Avaya was a strategic step we made over a year ago, to get ready for this moment," MacDiarmid says.

## The process

When Showtime made the decision to upgrade, the business looked at a number of different options, according to Saleem Riaz, head of IT at the broadcaster. The company considered four different vendors initially, narrowing down the field to three: Avaya, Cisco, and Alcatel, Showtime's previous provider.

"We compared prices, features – the main decision behind going with Avaya was their experience in the call centre arena. Along with Alcatel, they're the most experienced in call centres," explained Riaz.

"Cisco's a relatively new player – while they're doing very well, and the system is good, we didn't feel that the system had enough maturity; while we were doing the tendering process, Cisco changed their operating system about three times. It shows they're improving, and working very hard – the upgrades were

feature-related, not function-related. But in a call centre you want something stable, that already has all those features and is known to work in other areas."

Showtime's main drive to upgrade came from a need for more telephony features, especially a more comprehensive and stable interactive voice response (IVR) system. Riaz says the previous system, at around five years old, did not offer a sufficiently stable IVR to support expected customer demand.

Once the Showtime team had decided to go with Avaya for the US\$1.2 million project, they went on to choose EMW as the integrator, at the recommendation of Avaya, along with Servian, an India-based company, as the testing partner. Showtime placed the order in December 2005, and took delivery in January 2006.

"We did the implementation in two phases," says Riaz. "The first was the telecom system, all the normal call-centre operations, and the rest of the office – that was done in four months, and went live by May 2006. The second phase was integrating it with our CRM (customer relationship management) system and IVR, so people could order home-cinema movies, pay their accounts with credit cards and so on. That took about two months to complete – it went live in June 2006."

In addition to the Avaya telephony system, Showtime also upgraded some of its network infrastructure components; it installed Juniper routers for its core, as well as Foundry switches.

"We originally had a mix of HP and Cisco in the back end; we had to replace all of our switches, as they weren't compatible with VoIP, they didn't have Quality of Service (QoS) enabled on them," Riaz says.

"So we looked into Cisco, Foundry and another vendor – we decided the Foundry switches offered the right mix of price and performance. We still have some Cisco routers dotted around, but our core environment is now on Juniper routers and Foundry switches."

The infrastructure implementation was fairly smooth according to Riaz; because the Avaya system would use the data system rather than the telephony cabling system, there was no disruption to the existing Alcatel system, which continued to work well for the organisation. Riaz also says because of the parallel implementation, Showtime was able to deploy the new phones to desks a month before the go-live date. In terms of the back end, Showtime and EMW needed to ensure the system would be flexible enough to cope with future demands.



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**Saleem Riaz, head of IT at Showtime**

"On the hardware side, the most important part of the implementation was getting QoS right across the building – making sure that all the voice traffic is prioritised over other types of traffic, which also have their own priorities," Riaz explains.

"We have floor-based VLANs as well, so we needed to make sure that was set up correctly. On the Avaya PABX side, we had to set them up to deal with our very complicated call flows, which change frequently – we had to design it in such a way to make sure we could change it easily; in the past year we must have changed the call flows at least 15 times. It's not major changes, but small changes here and there."

The call flow structuring meant Showtime and EMW needed to work out in advance how the flows might change over time, and programming this into the system at the start of the process – this will avoid the need for major programming work later, according to Riaz.

"If you look at the documentation for VDNs (vector directory numbers, used to direct incoming callers to particular agent groups) in our system, it's several inches thick; I'm sure it could have been simplified, but that wouldn't have given us the flexibility we needed," he says.

The final stage of the hardware deployment was to switch incoming calls from the Alcatel

system to the Avaya one, something Riaz says was as simple as pulling the telco's cables from the old system and putting them in the new one.

The project team carried this out at around 4am in the morning – the quietest time for the contact centre – and by 6am the switchover was complete. Riaz says this was largely trouble-free, with only a few mis-routed calls to tackle – there were no lost or dropped calls at all though.

The integration of Showtime's CRM with the new telephony system, a critical part of the implementation, was one area which took longer than Showtime's staff initially expected, according to Riaz. He says this was down to expectations within Showtime about the ease of the process – something which EMW and Servian changed at the start of the project.

The main challenge with the system was not in the end an IT issue, but a training one – Showtime and EMW needed to train staff both in the call centre and business to acclimatise them to the new features and phones.

"So the users would say 'I used to be able to do this in the Alcatel system – it used to take two steps, now it takes three', but then another 10 features would be quicker on the new system," explains Riaz. "We needed them to understand that not everything would be

perfect, that it wouldn't be an exact copy – you'd have to check your voicemail in a different way, for example."

#### Counting the benefits

Showtime is now starting to reap the benefits of the implementation, in a number of different ways. From a financial standpoint, the improved IVR is reducing the number of calls coming through to agents, allowing the business to slow or even freeze its call centre recruitment.

In addition, MacDiarmid identifies the new telephony system as a key part of the dramatic increase in pay-per-view movie purchases the broadcaster has seen: from 40,000-50,000 before the implementation – and Showtime's marketing drive – the firm's subscribers are now ordering around 100,000 movies per month, with 90% of the orders through the IVR or by SMS short code.

"Before the Avaya system, IVR use always stuck around the half-way mark – the previous technology was not as reliable from a technical standpoint," says MacDiarmid. "People have to find it easy first time, every time – the old system tended to go down occasionally, and customers would have a bad experience and call a human, because they knew they'd at least get through."

"Now, they're buying twice as many movies as they generally used to, and the customers are also giving a vote of confidence to the technology by using it 90% of the time to order the movies."

MacDiarmid also says overall customer satisfaction has improved by 10% since the deployment, as well as the average number of calls to resolve a problem dropping from 2.1 to 1.5 – a figure which MacDiarmid says compares very favourably with his previous employer Sky TV in the UK, a large and successful satellite broadcaster.

# Tip-top tactics

Jumeirah Group constantly leverages high-tech systems to offer its customers more and put its competition in the shade.

The Jumeirah Group is a true home grown brand with global aspirations and one that is on an aggressive growth path. The group, which is already one of the largest hospitality firms in the UAE with 10,400 employees and 3000 computer users, has several iconic properties in Dubai, like the Burj Al Arab, some worldwide and is working on more global sites.

"We have been growing at a fast clip and the aim is to reach 50 to 60 hotels by 2011," says David Teklit, group director of IT infrastructure and IT security, Jumeirah Group. And that growth is just the hotel division.

Befitting an organisation that wants to become a global player of note, the Jumeirah Group pays a lot of attention to technology.

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"I would like to quote my CEO here. He always says that information technology is the cornerstone of the organisation. IT infrastructure is the glue that sticks things together and there is no part of the business that IT does not touch. We constantly try to innovate and use technology as a competitive weapon in the marketplace. We use technology to stay different from the competition and to ensure that we always have an edge," says Teklit.

So crucial does the group consider technology that it has often implemented IT systems way before its peers in the region. The group began using Microsoft's Windows Rights Management Services to secure sensitive content way back in 2004 and according to Teklit, this was the first implementation of its kind outside the US.

It has also been extensively using solutions and systems for remote infrastructure management that allows Teklit's team to predict and analyse troubles on the group's growing network, covering its set of global properties.

The company constantly tries to improve, upgrade and add to its network and infrastructure

components to achieve higher efficiency and add more services.

The group's recent implementation of a remote access solution is a good example of its use of technology to reach its goals as well as the processes it strictly follows to achieve optimum benefits.

## Remotely yours

"The network is the core foundation of Jumeirah's IT Infrastructure. It brings together applications, systems, storage and every aspect of IT," states Jumeirah's Teklit.

With the group expanding beyond home shores and setting up more offices and properties globally, Teklit felt the need to ensure the highest efficiency levels on the network while delivering optimum performance.

"We considered a remote access solution since it would help us centralise our applications at a primary location. It

would also be a reliable way to provide access to our remote users, even those who are travelling," says Jumeirah's Teklit.

The company surveyed various solutions from different vendors and piloted some before picking Citrix's remote access solution.

"There were two key reasons for selecting the Citrix access solution. The first was that it allowed us to manage and operate applications centrally which reduced complexity at the remote site as well as improved efficiency levels at the headquarters. The second reason was bandwidth. As we all know the cost of bandwidth in the UAE is extremely high and this is a big challenge. We found Citrix's Presentation server to be the best choice to deliver applications on a limited bandwidth," says Teklit.

The company also considered the need to enforce high levels of security when opening up apps for remote access.

"We had to ensure effective security around the apps. We decided to go for a centralised solution with strong second factor authentication. For this purpose we chose RSA SecureID with its

authentication manager. The token is used in conjunction with the user's network login password and automatically generated passcode. To top that up for some key users we also encode a four digit PIN code that is known only to the user. We needed to ensure that we have a secure environment using tools and technology that are user friendly and RSA SecureID gave us the balance we needed to achieve this goal," says Teklit.

Having selected the solution, the IT team had a meeting with Citrix to discuss design and implementation parameters.

Teklit and his team then put the system through a rigorous testing process in the firm's test lab. According to Teklit, most products are put through a test before being implemented since this helps them assess its performance and evaluate any bottlenecks they might face. This reduces trouble-shooting and cuts down on time during the production phase.

"We needed a bit of customisation and changes during the testing phase when the user interface had to be changed to reflect the visual guides that the users were familiar with. We also had to remove certain analysis elements in Citrix and mitigate risk with other security parameters. Apart from that, the implementation was a smooth process and deployment was finished in four weeks," says Teklit.

The project did not call for undue changes to the company's infrastructure as well apart from the addition of servers and a separate leased line for bandwidth. The project went live in October 2006.

## Answering the call

Another significant deployment for the company involved the use of an Avaya solution for the firm's global call centre which works out of Dubai. The importance of the call centre cannot be overstated since it handles reservations and queries from potential customers around the world.

The firm migrated from a Mitel to an Avaya platform for a centralised call centre solution which operates 24 X 7 and is expected to grow to 120 agents soon. The infrastructure is based on Avaya 8300 servers, Avaya media gateways and IP client agents. The implementation was carried out by systems integrator, EMW.

"The call centre receives calls from more than 30 toll free numbers in various regions. As the



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**David Teklit, group director of IT infrastructure and IT security, Jumeirah Group**

call centre plays a significant role in our business, we ensure that the network and the platform that support it are highly available and redundant in nature. In an event of service outage at the call centre site we do have a disaster recovery site where we can continue to receive calls with very minimal impact to the business," says Teklit.

Apart from the call centre, the group is also planning on implementing VoIP across all of its hotel properties.

"We have some VoIP implementation in some of our properties already. We are going to take that to the next level with voice over wireless. We have implemented wireless in some hotels - like the Jumeirah Beach Hotel which uses Trapeze Technology - but we want to roll it out across the group. This will help the back office staff to use their mobile phones without being charged by the service provider. It will also provide additional convenience to guests who can travel from one property to another with full roaming capability on their laptop and mobile devices," says Teklit.

#### The recipe for success

The Jumeirah group has managed to constantly derive return on investment and continuing benefits from its IT investments. There are several reasons for this. The primary one is that the IT team - with a total of 80 personnel, 23 of whom are at the corporate level - is geared to think in terms of business and organisational benefits.

"A lot goes around in the IT department and we tend to have a lot of projects at any one time - and all are quite important. Our challenge is to combine expansion and growth with using technology. In some companies, especially in hotels, IT is just a support function to business. We do more than just support. We use IT to bring value to the business. We want to drive growth whether in revenues, marketshare or loyalty. This is what drives us and it is quite challenging," says Teklit.

The annual budgeting process for IT makes evident the close tie between business functions and technology at the Jumeirah Group.

"At the beginning of the year we consider initiatives across different businesses. There is an IT steering committee which is headed by the CTO and members include the CEO and the chief officers of almost all departments. This committee prioritises IT projects based on the company's direction, growth and what's critical for customers," says Teklit.

This goes hand in hand with operational budgets which cover the maintenance and support of existing IT infrastructure. Businesses are also welcome to put in specific project requests based on their needs and the IT team works on them as they come up.

"We involve the business divisions in IT to a large extent and this is true even in the selection process. When it comes to pure technology, such as the Citrix implementation, the IT team does extensive research, looks at various technologies and take security into account. But when it comes to applications, especially those which would be used by different departments, we call in the people to give their suggestions," states Teklit.

The selection process involves the floating of a tender, followed by a shortlisting of vendors. An invitation is sent out to people of different functions who would be using the system and a demo is organised based on their requirements. The business units are then asked to decide from what they have seen.

"Our motto is that if it's an app the users should decide. We can run any technology and if the app is not at all compatible then we will advise on the same. That is how we go about systems that are heavily used. This includes property management, HR and finance that are critical for day to day operations. When you involve people who use these systems early, there is minimal need for

change management during implementation and transformation is easy with the buy in. That is our strategy and process," says Teklit.

#### The end of the road?

The Jumeirah Group continues to research, implement and use technology to differentiate itself and to provide better services to its clients. According to Teklit, the most important project that is on his plate at the moment is the movement of the current datacenter to a Tier III level.

"We have distributed server rooms where each hotel or property has its own. This is because there are certain guest facing apps which have to reside in the hotel. The primary datacenters is in Dubai and my work will involve moving it to the Tier III level. The datacentre has served us well so far but the growth of the company necessitates the pumping in of new apps and the upgrading of everything mechanical, electrical and physical security oriented," says Teklit.

The Jumeirah group is also planning on a business continuity and disaster recovery site in the near future to ensure that the firm's information remains well protected. The technology team is also involved in upgrading the current backbone used by the hotel business.

"Three years ago we had overhauled the network to streamline IT operations and remove complexities that arose from the fast expansion of Jumeirah and now in 2007 we are building the next generation network to support the future growth of Jumeirah," says Teklit.

The IT team constantly works on capacity management and maintains a buffer of 30% to 40% to accommodate the fast pace of growth across the group. Teklit is also involved in designing network architecture and components for other businesses within the group.

One certainly cannot accuse the Jumeirah Group's IT team of taking it easy.