

Express response from DHL's UAE contact centre

By Sathya Mithra Ashok [Network](#) on Wednesday, September 03, 2008



MARK SAMMUT: IT is of crucial importance at DHL.

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DHL UAE has implemented a domestic call centre and linked its multiple sites with an IP network to improve customer service provision and office productivity.

There are only a few global brands that over time have left a lasting impression on people. DHL would certainly count as one among them.

Since 1969, the company has grown to become one of the most trustworthy providers of delivery solutions for customers worldwide. Present in the UAE since 1976, DHL Worldwide Express has consistently delivered quality to its customers. Effective use of information technology has been key to the organisation's achievement of its goals.

All that IT has made possible was not achieved in a day, but it is also true that DHL is able to maintain its high standards by ensuring that its technology usage is state-of-the-art and tuned into its business needs.

"IT is of crucial importance at DHL. It is the glue that holds the various departments of the organisation together. We actually call our function the engine of the entire organisation. In terms of information collation, availability and making sure that everything is there in terms of collection and delivery to endpoints, IT remains extremely crucial," states Mark Sammut, IT manager at DHL Express, UAE.

As Sammut puts it, all that IT has made possible was not achieved in a day, but it is also true that DHL is able to maintain its high standards by ensuring that its technology usage is state-of-the-art and tuned into its business needs, as well as ensuring that any investment can be managed and run both centrally and more effectively.

"We have a 14 person IT team in the UAE. We also have an area team, which looks after the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey, located in Bahrain. The business uses a demand and supply model, with our EEMEA regional demand team being located in Brussels. Most of our core applications, data and infrastructure are housed in strategic global datacentres which are managed by our IT supply organisation. These datacentres operate in a follow-the-sun approach. The first is in Malaysia, second in the US and a third in Czechoslovakia. From a country point of view, we mostly purchase from our supply organisation and monitor service delivery with several key performance indicators. We also provide the endpoint delivery when it comes to global or regional projects regarding the UAE. We cover implementations, security and maintenance of infrastructure," says Sammut.

"The majority of the UAE team is focused on front-end services. We have a centralised service desk for our area located in Bahrain. Basically, when someone needs help they are directed there. These calls are categorised into tickets using HP Openview and then assigned accordingly. First, timely resolution is the key focus. If this cannot be achieved the ticket is then routed to the local team or to one of the datacentres," says Sammut.

DHL Express has an established datacentre in Dubai for the UAE. Performing multiple functions for the country, the datacentre is also meant to connect to the core.

"DHL Express is one of several business units in DPWN (Deutsche Post World Net). There is an extensive amount of work that goes into integration between these businesses. Apart from the DHL Express datacentre in Dubai, there is also an area supply organisation one, which provides connectivity and shared services," says Sammut.

The company has also taken adequate measures for disaster recovery, where local datacentres are mirrored for back-up remotely, and is also made redundant within itself to make it more resistant to any unexpected occurrences.

Sammut says that the current Express datacentre in Dubai is a Tier III one and the firm is planning on setting up a disaster recovery site in the country in the very near future.

He also emphasises the DHL mentality of in-sourcing, where the company tends to use resources from within its own confines wherever possible. This has enabled the firm to maximise productivity, extend control and ensure quality in a more uniform fashion.

A good example of this is the way local teams of the company handle application development. According to Sammut, when there is a need for a specific application, the information is first collected from multiple regions for availability and costing within the internal development teams. Based on this data, a decision is subsequently made and the application is given out for relevant development.

Connectivity sorted out

Recently, with growth increasing for the company, DHL felt the need for a dedicated UAE call centre to handle domestic customer queries.

"We have a very mature call centre located at the Dubai airport which handles our international products. Recently, we expanded it even further by adding resources dedicated to handling our domestic products," says Sammut.

With his team, Sammut began the process of selecting the right partner for setting up the domestic call centre by utilising the company's internal procurement department.

"We all have specific needs and procurement is a large part of our business. To supply to DHL, vendors or integrators have to meet and satisfy specific service terms. These may include being listed with partner programs and being able to meet global agreements. Everything is put through a comprehensive list and you will be able to pick the best fit from it. This varies on a project-by-project basis," says Sammut.

After due consideration and looking through multiple providers, DHL chose EMW to implement the domestic call centre. The integrator was also chosen to upgrade the company's existing Avaya solution and IP-enable multiple sites.

A quick look at DHL

Revenue 2003: EUR 22 billion

Number of fulltime employees: More than 160,000

Number of offices: Around 5,000

Number of hubs, warehouses & terminals: More than 450

Number of gateways: 238

Number of vehicles: 75,000

Number of countries & territories: More than 220

Number of customers: 4.2 million

Shipments per year: More than 1 billion

Destinations covered: 120,000



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This upgradation was felt necessary since the business was growing rapidly and there was a need to integrate operations across sites.

"As our chosen integrator EMW has been involved in upgrading our previous PABX to a VoIP model and getting our sites linked to a single integrated platform. To achieve that, a number of prerequisites needed to be in place. The project needed to allow our business to keep functioning during the migration and as such planning this was crucial. A good IP schema segmented in to VLAN templates is imperative for multiple sites, as is setting up quality of service end-to-end," says Sammut.

"This project centred around our migration from leased lines to MPLS and the ability for our ISP to deliver. Being a cautious company, we wanted to ensure the stability and maturity of the MPLS network at each site before we integrated them. Currently, around two sites are integrated into a central PABX platform. Most of DHL's sites have been moved to an Avaya IP platform and are yet to be converted to LSPs. The idea is to get them centralised as we migrate entirely over to the MPLS platform," states Sammut.

These open channels allow us to work and co-ordinate in a much closer manner across our various locations, and helps us handle things on the fly.

According to him, preparation for and the deployment of the VoIP solution took almost a year as the company wanted to be well equipped for the subsequent move to MPLS.

"Our central PABX runs in mixed mode utilising TDM and VoIP. This is because we have a number of other applications and modules like call recording which integrates with the PABX and the changes would have an impact on our service delivery. We took the cautious approach by keeping a foot in both camps," states Sammut.

He says that the team encountered challenges during the project, predominantly those centring around delivery of 'out of control items', which had to be received via partners and were out of DHL's immediate sphere of influence.

"The project itself and the tasks within the project when started were a hit. But before you start, you have to get everything just right, make sure that the prerequisites are in place so that the project is successful when it takes off," says Sammut.

Counting time

While DHL's domestic call centre is around nine months old, the IP implementation across the company's offices was completed only around two months back. However, DHL has been busy with a lot more than just that over the last year.

"We have upgraded our scanners to use GPRS and EDGE technology. We have also brought in wireless phones to reduce costs and provide a uniform, effective method of communication within our offices. We found that a majority of our mobile communications were being done from within our facilities, within reach of our infrastructure," says Sammut.

The company stuck with Avaya and brought in a SIP server to provide open communication and viability with other OEM devices. A few of these devices have been rolled out and the entire implementation is expected to be complete soon.

"In the past we had several wireless protocols and networks being utilised. The new design allowed us to tidy up and bring one secure way of communicating, via the IP, for mobile computing, wireless phones or extended LAN services. This has also enabled us to have a very quick turnaround in deploying wireless phones to our staff within our campus. We enjoyed some cost reduction in not having to switch over to mobile phones when needing wireless communication within our building," says Sammut.

The company has also started on a few future projects. Sammut wants to finish the entire MPLS migration by the end of the year and the complete integration of the remaining sites to one central system by March 2009.

"Domestic applications, increased consolidation and core management will be among our key focus areas in the next year. We will also continue to work on the call centre," says Sammut.

Adjusting cash flow

DHL is a truly international player and being in the logistics and supply chain business, the company has a need to integrate and work together across its multiple locations, worldwide, in order to achieve its goals. An idea of the co-ordination that the firm does manage to achieve can be glimpsed in the way it plans its IT budgets.

According to Sammut, the IT budgets are done on an annual basis. They are also re-examined and reforecast on a quarterly basis.

"We formally look at budgets four times a year, with the later three being re-forecasts. The budget considers what project activities are being conducted on a regional/area basis and has input from different business domains. Local activities and infrastructure needs are incorporated and rolled up with revenue targets. A number of tools are used as part of the forecasting process. These help to manage the numbers and to ensure appropriate return of investments for our shareholders," says Sammut.

Apart from the quarterly reviews at the highest levels, Sammut maintains that informal, off the cuff discussions happen simultaneously among global team members.

"These open channels allow us to work and co-ordinate in a much closer manner across our various locations, and helps us effectively handle things on the fly," states Sammut.

It is doubtless that DHL has made a success of itself by using internal strengths in the most effective manner possible, and by keeping quality as its guiding force.

The company has used IT as a valuable tool to achieve its business objectives, to support its growth and this is one of the major reasons for its continued and future success.

As Sammut puts it: "Everybody's philosophy is that IT is meant to support the commercial areas of the business and look at what can be put forward and supported efficiently. This remains one of the keys to our effective and sustained growth."

Infrastructure at DHL UAE

Core switches: Cisco 3750 Collapsible Core

Edge switches: Cisco 3750 Stack

Routers: Cisco 2811, 2821, 3640

Firewalls: NetScreen 5GT

Voice systems: Avaya S8720, LSP G350/700

Servers: HP DL380

WAN optimization: Riverbed Steelhead & Packeteers

Network OS: Microsoft XP, Server 2003

WLAN: Cisco 4400 Controller with Aironet 1200 Series AP

Wireless WAN: fSONA 155-M / 155-S

Remote access: Cisco VPN Concentrator

Network management systems: Solarwinds Orion, Netflow

Storage: HP MSA 1500 / EVA 3000