Marine Repair Expert Gulf Copper Keeps Operations Ship Shape with Converged IP Network

About Gulf Copper

Gulf Copper started operations over 50 years ago as a specialty contractor installing copper tubing on marine vessels. Since that time, the company has greatly expanded its scope of operations. It continues to serve the commercial marine market, but has expanded into the military marine, offshore, petrochemical and industrial markets. Base services include full topside marine repair, steel fabrication, steel and mechanical repair, machining, painting and blasting. An employee-owned company, Gulf Copper strives to be the preferred provider of marine and industrial fabrication and repair services in the markets it serves.

Situation

Gulf Copper promises to create value for customers, employee-owners, vendors and the communities in which the company operates by consistently producing exceptional quality with timely performance. Adherence to core principals of workplace safety, environmental protection and ethical dealings with its stakeholders has led to remarkable growth and the existing frame relay network strained to handle the company's data needs. Because managers at each of the company's five locations chose software, hardware and phone services independently over the years, collaboration among locations was difficult and expanding the network presented a significant challenge.

Solution

Gulf Copper upgraded its infrastructure with an MPLS-based AT&T IP network that connects its five Texas locations. Officials expect the converged solution to streamline network management, improve customer service and facilitate collaboration with customers, vendors and other company stakeholders.

Easier, Faster and Cheaper Solution Gives Company Ongoing Flexibility

When it became clear that Gulf Copper needed to implement a new network, three factors of prime importance emerged. Scalability was a must, as there was every indication that the company would continue to expand. Ease of management was also an important factor, since the company's IT department consisted of only one professional. Finally, Gulf Copper insisted that its network serve as a foundation for the future, giving the company the flexibility to deploy Voice over IP and other services that would meet employees' needs while cutting costs.

IT Manager Jarrod Hooker determined these priorities after detailed consultations with Gulf Copper staff that rely on the network. "I listen to the needs of all the people working on the network to understand the primary features they need to work efficiently and communicate better," Hooker said. "We're constantly looking at new things to optimize the network to give people the best work environment. Everything I focus on here is all about making it easier, faster and cheaper."

AT&T's IP network met all of Gulf Copper's criteria, allowing staff to streamline the way they do their jobs. "The MPLS network was scalable and seem to fit all our data needs and future voice needs," Hooker said. The company was able to quickly deploy its customized accounting package that, along with e-mail, gets top priority on the network. It saved money and improved both efficiency and the quality of its printed materials almost immediately by replacing standalone workstation printers with network laser printers.

Gulf Copper Facts

- **Business Needs**
  Increased ability for employees to work together

- **Networking Solution**
  Centralized networking solution encourages collaboration, simplifies network management

- **Business Value**
  Enhanced productivity, improved customer service

- **Industry Focus**
  Marine, steel and mechanical repair

- **Size**
  Five locations

at&t

The network also supports computer assisted design (CAD) packages that company engineers and fabricators require to make complicated repairs to marine vessels. The speed and strength of its IP network enables Gulf Copper to transmit the huge CAD files, improving work flow by getting the files to their destinations more quickly and saving on the cost of overnight delivery services.

> "People see the benefits of working from centralized servers with centralized data storage and having network-based antivirus software to control and monitor everything. It's a much more productive environment."
>
> **– Jarrod Hooker, Gulf Copper IT Manager**

The company is currently implementing a document management system designed to convert all paperwork to images that can be stored on the network, so employees at each Gulf Copper location will be able to access all the files they need just by entering keywords. "If they want to pull up everything that has to do with job 1234, the database will pull up every item that's been coded to job 1234 in the system," Hooker said. Archival material will soon be available online when the company begins scanning all old paper files into the system, making the files easier to access and freeing office space by eliminating the need for filing cabinets.

Employee-Owners Collaborate Better Thanks to MPLS Solution

As the administrator responsible for maintaining Gulf Copper's wide area network, Hooker saw his biggest challenge as "making everybody happy at the same time." Being available to the entire staff regardless of their location is a basic necessity, Hooker said. "Anytime somebody in Galveston or Corpus Christi has a problem I need to be able to address that problem, sometimes immediately," he said.

Because each location operates independently, he said, connecting them on a single network was a real challenge. "Each location had different mentalities on how things should be done," Hooker said. "Changing them from standalone work groups to a centralized network environment brought a different dynamic."

But the company's employee-owners in all five locations were quick to see the benefits of Gulf Copper's converged network. "Our operating system is now much faster, which is a big plus," he said. It also makes network monitoring and administration much easier. For instance, he no longer needs to travel five hours or more to visit each location to handle network problems. "I'm able to implement network-based software to control computers and applications on a much more controlled scale, which eliminates a lot of problems," he said.

Standardizing software has helped streamline processes for all locations. "People see the benefits of working from centralized servers with concentrated data storage and network-based antivirus software to control and monitor everything," Hooker said. Compared with the standalone systems, he said, "it's a much more productive environment."

The company finds many advantages to its new network. "MPLS brings everything under one umbrella," Hooker added. "We have one IT department that manages everything and one provider that handles all our computer needs for the whole company. Basically it comes down to being able to control everything from one environment, which is a big plus since our IT department is very small."

Network Sets the Course for Smooth Sailing

Gulf Copper found it easy to turn to AT&T for an IP networking solution. "We were already using AT&T for data and voice services, and they were able to offer us an easy path to move towards MPLS rather than continuing with frame relay," Hooker said. AT&T pricing was attractive and the company also helped Gulf Copper extend its reach.

The company appreciates AT&T's attentive monitoring of its network. In the past Hooker often had to wait until one of his end users called to report a problem, which he then had to manually troubleshoot. Now, in the event of any network difficulties, Hooker gets immediate notification from an automated attendant, followed closely by a call from an AT&T network specialist. "I can express my concerns and see what's going on with the network immediately," he said.

Gulf Copper plans to use this proactive mindset to improve internal network management and maintenance. "We are moving to more preemptive implementation and management to try to anticipate and reduce problems rather than react to them," he said.

This outlook will help the company as it continues to grow. "We're always looking to expand, and the company is talking about adding locations and possibly adding personnel at some existing locations," he said. The company's network is designed to handle immediate growth and future expansions. "We may have to enhance what we already have, but the base network environment is already in place, so there shouldn't be any problems when we do expand."

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