

Case Study

Industry: Education

University of South Alabama

Project: VoIP-based communications

Major challenges: Hybrid system phased migration

Major benefit: Cost-effective unified communications



The background

More than 15,000 students attend the University of South Alabama (USA), in Mobile, AL. The university employs approximately 5500 faculty and staff and consists of 10 schools and colleges. Its health system, including the College of Medicine, Mitchell Cancer Institute, and two hospitals, provides state-of-the-art healthcare for 250,000 patients annually.

Because it is one of the fastest growing universities in the state, its campus is undergoing a 10-year construction program valued in excess of \$475 million. David Blough, CIO, University of South Alabama Hospitals, wanted to take advantage of new VoIP technologies to improve communications on campus and at the medical facilities.

"We wanted to replace our aging telephone system," explained Mr. Blough. "It was installed in 1988, and we could no longer get parts for it and we couldn't upgrade it. We wanted to install new systems before the old one crashed and we wouldn't be able to get it back up."

He sought proposals for a multiyear, phased-in replacement of the current telecommunications systems. The proposals were to be considered a long-term solution for USA and be capable of meeting the university's current telecommunications and voice messaging needs and offer the potential for future feature enhancements and expansion to additional facilities.

What's your best solution?

Mr. Blough took a novel approach when bidding out the communications project. Instead of putting together a typical 100-page bid specification, he put together a 6-page request for proposal describing the university's current voice and data environment and

the desired solution. His goal was to deploy a cost-effective communications system that would minimize risk and appear seamless to end users during the multiphased migration. Ultimately, he wanted to increase capacity, gain flexibility, streamline operations, and to cost-effectively leverage his existing infrastructure. In addition, he also wanted the vendors to submit a detailed implementation plan as part of the RFP.

"I wanted to know how the vendor will take us from our current box to a new box without totally disrupting campus communications," he added. "Hopefully this way, we'll get the best solution each vendor has to offer instead of asking the vendor to fit to what we wanted," he said. His plan worked. Approximately 15 vendors responded. After reviewing the proposals and implementation plans, he narrowed the list to three vendors. After site visits and presentations, he chose Black Box.

A new IP-based system, less manpower.

The university chose a new communications system based on Black Box's recommendation. It gives the university advanced IP-based communications, including capabilities such as mobility, centralized management, a standards-based, IT-oriented architecture, plus multimedia-enabled end-user communications.

"This new system can easily mesh with our legacy communications infrastructure, which still has a lot of life left in it," said Mr. Blough. "With this system and Black Box's help, we can manage our VoIP migration at our own pace. In addition, it's also reducing our manpower needs in doing moves, adds, and changes," he added. "For instance, departments are moving all the time. Now with VoIP, they can pick up their phone and move themselves." *(Continued on the next page.)*

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David Blough, CIO, University of South Alabama Hospitals



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Case Study (Continued)

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A well-planned, phased-in migration.

One of the primary reasons Mr. Blough chose Black Box was its implementation plan and its expertise and experience in supporting both older and newer technologies.

“Black Box is able to make the old and the new work together,” he explained.

The older campus communications infrastructure consists of an aging copper backbone. Mr. Blough wanted to upgrade it, but he didn't have the budget to run new CAT6 cable and fiber throughout the campus. So Black Box devised a plan on how to use the existing infrastructure while migrating to the new system, one building at a time.

The multiyear migration plan developed by Black Box is enabling the university to upgrade its communications technology with minimal impact on end-users and with no disruption of communications between the campus and the three hospitals. It also enabled the university to build a foundation of IP telephony and advanced communications at a pace that makes both financial and functional sense.

A trusted partner

From the initial bid through the communications migration, Black Box has earned the trust of the university team. “We have a lot of confidence in Black Box,” said Mr. Blough. “Being familiar with the university and campus, they were able to meet our needs better than other vendors. They have a good understanding of what we need. And they give us very good technical help.”

“What's really important with our relationship with Black Box is their ability to get answers from the vendor,” Mr. Blough continued. “We were early adopters of this system and had some technical problems. We always get a much better response with Black Box calls.”

Future plans

As the phased migration proceeds, Mr. Blough plans to add SIP phones, add more wireless, and upgrade the campus emergency notification system. He is also planning to roll out the system to replace the existing legacy PBX equipment at the two university hospitals in a phased approach similar to the campus roll-out.

