
COMMUNITY HOUSING WORKS



■ Overview

Community Housing Works (CHW) opened its doors 30 years ago with only 15 employees. Today, the non-profit organization has grown to 110 employees and expanded to three office locations. The growth has helped propel CHW in its mission to help people and communities in San Diego move up in the world through opportunities to own, rent, and achieve. Expanding to multiple offices with many employees also presented some challenges with communications, particularly using their outdated phone system. The organization turned to Digium's Switchvox UC system to provide an affordable, flexible business phone system that out-performed competing systems and helped the not-for-profit save \$450,000 in communications costs.

An Upgraded Phone System Saves California-based Nonprofit a Half-Million Dollars: Switchvox Unified Communications Solution Helps Organization Reach More Clients in Need

Based in California, CHW's comprehensive programs proudly serve more than 8,000 children and adults each year. Their non-profit realty and lending services combined with homeownership classes and coaching help people own. The beautiful, safe, and green communities they build provide homes working families can afford to rent; and their financial

classes and coaching, academic supports for youth, and leadership support, help people achieve their goals. Throughout the years, loyal supporters and volunteers have helped keep costs down for the nonprofit by donating and helping purchase equipment, including a phone system for the office. When CHW made the decision to open a new facility, the decision was made to reassess the costs attributed to their existing business telecommunications. It quickly became clear it was time to let go of the existing phone system and invest in a better, more reliable solution.

Once the original system was established as the system of choice, recurring costs were never examined. Meanwhile, costs were increasing every month.

“When I joined the company, they were operating a hybrid hosted solution called CallTower,” explains CHW’s Director of IT, Scott Granger. “The main PBX was located 800 miles away in Utah, but the company had a longstanding relationship with CallTower that no one had questioned, in spite of the many problems they were facing.”

When CHW originally implemented the CallTower system, it was sufficient. The company adopted the system and outsourced the needed IT maintenance to keep costs at a minimum. Everyone was happy as long as communications were operational and affordable. Once the system was “grandfathered in” as the system of choice, recurring costs were never examined - that is, until Granger came to the company and conducted the first review of the system in years. That long overdue analysis of the legacy system uncovered many issues.

The first problem was tied to the growth rate of the company. CHW had added personnel slowly but steadily, over a 15-year period since the company had first implemented the CallTower system. “The former IT director just called Utah whenever a new employee came on board and said, ‘I need a new phone’. No one was acknowledging that the bill was steadily creeping up every month,” says Granger.

Another problem uncovered by Granger was that as costs grew, so did the service problems.

The utility-type service provided no face-to-face interaction and very little technical support from so far away. “Superior customer service is a philosophy I have adhered to throughout my career and I am proud of that. As a result, I have high expectations in terms of service from my vendors and we were not getting that from CallTower.”

Granger decided to get CHW’s CFO involved. “He asked me, ‘What can we save?’. I did my due diligence and looked at four new telecom systems: Nortel, Avaya, Cox, and Digium’s Switchvox.”

“What I found was that by replacing the hosted hybrid with a Digium Switchvox, we could save \$450,000 in 5 years,” said Granger.

Cox offered another hosted hybrid, but with the organization quickly moving toward enterprise requirements, a more robust solution was needed. “We also wanted our own phones and local support,” he says. “Both Nortel and Avaya were local companies but they used Exchange®-based soft links that presented us with compatibility issues when trying to integrate their hosted services with the backend of Microsoft® Exchange. They both had what I call a fit-it-and-forget-it attitude. They would come set it up for us and then leave it for us to manage with only minimal support.”

When Granger turned his attention to Digium’s Switchvox Unified Communications (UC) system, he found the perfect solution at a price he could afford. The savings he discovered were astonishing.

“What I found was that by replacing the hosted hybrid with a Digium Switchvox, we could save \$450,000 in 5 years,” said Granger. That was substantial savings for any business, but especially for a nonprofit. Granger said he was immediately sold.

“We purchased the Switchvox system along with 115 new phones,” says Granger. “We also bought a Switchvox 310 as a Cold Spare for onsite emergency recovery. The spare would allow us to be back up and running in 5 to 10 minutes if we were to face a disaster that took the system down.”

Switchvox wasn’t entirely new to Granger, and he knew it had the capabilities and reliability he needed, in addition to the cost savings. He first discovered Switchvox while working with Scott Starost, founder and CEO of SDTek. The San-Diego-based business specializes in communications and is a Preferred Digium Partner that shows small businesses how they can affordably utilize VoIP technology to increase productivity and streamline communications. “I was certain that when we compared systems based on cost, feature sets, and service, Digium would win out; and I trusted Scott to meet my expectations in the technical support area,” says Granger.

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While moving the operations department into a new building, Granger worked with Starost and another company to help build out a completely new network infrastructure for CHW. They even consolidated some of the employees from the other two buildings, creating the new, 80-person headquarters. It serves as a hub for the remaining two offices, one of which is used as a public-facing retail location that houses 45 employees.

The robust set of all-inclusive features that Switchvox offers was another selling point for CHW. “We really enjoy the Chat integration,” says Granger. “The Lync solution we had previously was a desktop application that was supposed to integrate with Outlook, but it only worked half the time, so the Switchvox UC features are a welcomed addition. We also have voicemail-to-email integration. With the old system, we had user names and passwords, which is common enough, but the Outlook configuration made it hard to tie into our infrastructure.” Also, the

user-friendly web interface gives users full control over their connection and call routing, so they now enjoy the ability to push their calls to a cell phone.

For employees, the intuitive, easy-to-use design made transitioning to Switchvox almost effortless. It required little training to get the staff up-to-speed on how to record their greetings and manage their phones. “They were concerned about how accustomed we were to the old system and didn’t want there to be a huge learning curve. The new system had to be functional and easy to use - and Switchvox is just that.”

Gone are the days of depending on expensive support from the old, Utah-based company to handle common management functions. If CHW needs to add a new employee or move an employee from one office location to another, it can be handled internally or through a call to SDTech for local support. Another important benefit of Switchvox relates to the IVR trees CHW maintains. There are approximately 90 IVR trees, including two that are bilingual. The auto attendant can now send calls into the informational system or ring a line directly. “Switchvox has been a huge success, not just in terms of money savings and ROI,” added Granger, “but also in features and ease of use.”

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