



"I don't believe you can have a full unified communications solution without integrating mobile. It's all about productivity – if an organisation doesn't provide this kind of technology, it's holding itself back."

Adam Jacobs, Head of IT, First Rate Exchange Services

power to you



When you get your currency for a foreign trip, it's likely that it's been provided by First Rate Exchange Services. First Rate is the UK's biggest provider of travel money to consumers, including supplying all travel money for the Post Office, which is the UK's largest foreign exchange provider.

The company has three sites in and around London. Its IT team manages IT and communications both for itself and for Post Office Financial Services. In total, the team runs telephony and IT services for about 350 employees.

First Rate had previously put in place a fixed line communications system that integrated with Microsoft Office Communications Server (OCS), enabling its staff to access their voicemail through Microsoft Outlook. "We had a Microsoft Communicator client that linked into the phone system so everything joined up, but our mobile implementation was completely disjointed," says Adam Jacobs, Head of IT at First Rate Exchange Services.

"If we wanted to route calls to mobiles, the user had to set up call forwarding, and we had to pay the cost of the forwarded calls. Our staff had to deal with a second voicemail box on their mobile, and the presence feature in Communicator didn't tie in with the mobiles," says Adam. "We had incredible success in rolling out the fixed line unified communications services, and everyone enjoyed using all the new tools, but I wanted to make sure everything was joined up with mobile."

Having decided to add mobile to its unified communications system, First Rate reviewed the solutions available, as Adam explains: "Vodafone was the only supplier that had anything close to what we were looking for – Vodafone One was pretty much a perfect fit with the unified communications implementation we already had, and could integrate well with our existing OCS setup."

Improved productivity

Vodafone has implemented a system based on its Vodafone One solution, which has enabled First Rate to unify its fixed and mobile calls with email, conferencing and instant messaging.

"Vodafone One gives us calls distributed across mobile and fixed, so people can pick and choose where they answer their calls," says Adam. "It integrates well with our existing OCS implementation, including instant messaging and conference calling."

Around 200 employees now have mobile handsets, including 50 home-based staff who work remotely, and First Rate has standardised on the BlackBerry Bold 9780 handset. About 50 people also have access to high-speed mobile internet using 3G PC datacards.

Each person has a single voicemail box in Microsoft Exchange for all messages, and the presence feature in Communicator now works across fixed and mobile. "Presence is important, as our staff can recognise when someone is on the phone, and so won't try and call them on their fixed line if they're on the mobile or vice versa – which is a productivity benefit," says Adam.

With Vodafone One, First Rate has been able to introduce hot desking for some of its people who work at multiple sites. "All they need to do is plug in a network cable and a USB telephone," says Adam. "We also have people taking advantage of working flexibly from home in the same way, using their home broadband connection, without anyone else being aware they're not in the office."

“Over a five-year period, we’re saving around £450,000 in total – the mobile element of Vodafone One alone saves us £228,000.”

Adam Jacobs, Head of IT, First Rate Exchange Services



Cost savings

While the productivity gains are significant, Adam still had to justify the investment in the new solution in financial terms, as he explains: “Although Vodafone One makes everyone’s life easier, if I can’t make the numbers stack up, it won’t fly in today’s climate.”

All outbound calls are now handled by Vodafone, which saves a substantial amount of money for First Rate. “Over a five-year period, we’re saving around £450,000 in total,” says Adam. “The mobile element of Vodafone One alone saves us £228,000, which includes a huge saving on call rates as we have a single provider, as well as savings on mobile handset refreshes and general infrastructure – for example, we have decommissioned three ISDN switches.”

Vodafone One also means that First Rate no longer needs a second PBX for Disaster Recovery (DR), as Adam explains: “We’ve effectively now got a DR solution, because if our PBX were to fail, the landline calls will route to mobile automatically – so we don’t need to spend £100,000 on another PBX in a data centre for redundancy.”

Further savings come from conferencing, which previously cost First Rate around £40,000 a year in call charges to an external provider. The OCS environment has effectively become the conferencing solution and staff call an onsite number, so no external calls are required and there are no additional per minute costs.

“Billing and budgeting for telecoms is a major headache, as you generally don’t know how many calls people will make,” says Adam. “On top of the cost savings, the great thing about Vodafone One is that it gives us a fixed cost per person, which makes budgeting very easy – I know how much I’ll save.”

Leading edge technology

Adam describes himself as passionate about technology and its application to businesses. He says: “First Rate can achieve our levels of turnover and profit because we use leading edge technology, which also enables us to attract the right kind of people to our organisation.

“Vodafone One is a great example of how business can use technology. People expect this kind of technology to be available, they use it at home with applications such as Skype, and they like flexible working and its other benefits,” says Adam. “In some cases, they’ll leave the company if it’s not provided.

“I don’t believe you can have a full unified communications solution without integrating mobile,” concludes Adam. “It’s all about productivity – if an organisation doesn’t provide this kind of technology, it’s holding itself back.”

Significant benefits

- Running costs reduced by £450,000 over five year period due to lower call costs, reduced infrastructure expenses and free conferencing
- Vodafone solution means second PBX is no longer required to ensure business continuity, saving £100,000
- Productivity improved due to unified communications features such as presence, easy routing of calls to fixed or mobile lines, and single voicemail box

