

Failing to prepare means preparing to fail

Port of Ghent plans carefully to implement SIP Trunking without a hitch

For companies that want to make full use of their IP or hybrid PBXs, SIP Trunking makes it possible to communicate both inside and outside the organisation over IP. But what about the potential pitfalls and risks? For the Port of Ghent, those risks could be extreme: including losing contact with ships being guided into port. But thanks to proper planning and testing, the port was able to implement SIP Trunking without a hitch, and enjoy the benefits of lower monthly charges and increased VoIP functionality.



Hans Van Ootegem, ICT Manager, Port of Ghent, first presented this case at the BELTUG X-change on SIP Trunking, 15 February 2011

CHALLENGES

Staying in touch with ships in the night

With 30 separate ISDN lines, and 2 small, remote locations, the Port of Ghent faced sizable monthly digital and analogue telecoms costs. "That was a lot of subscription charges," comments ICT Manager Hans Van Ootegem – about 500 Euros per month, not counting communication costs! "Internet connection was our most important cost," he adds. Switching to SIP Trunking and adding VoIP was, he says, "the obvious choice. It's the future of telephony. It lets us connect our phones to the outside and the inside on the same IP basis."

But for an organisation like the Port of Ghent, planning such a move was a real challenge. "Our phone lines are critical: we absolutely could not risk the loss of our connection, especially for our 24/7 Harbour Master's Department, which is responsible for guiding the vessels." That's why, he says, everything had to be properly planned and piloted before the port went live with the SIP Trunking.

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Hans Van Ootegem, ICT Manager, Port of Ghent



Ghent Port Company manages the Port of Ghent, ensuring the necessary and adequate infrastructure for a smooth handling of shipping and cargo traffic. It also makes sure that a favourable social and economic climate is created for the companies that are active in the port or wish to establish themselves there.

The company counts 160 employees, including 3 IT staff. In 2010, 48 million tonnes of goods came through the Port of Ghent, from both seaborne and inland navigation traffic. The port generates an added value of 7.09 billion Euros and is responsible for 68,751 jobs (direct and indirect) in 300 companies. It has 5 docks: Grootdok, Sifferdok, Mercatordok, Rodenhuizedok and the recent Kluzendok.

SOLUTIONS

Planning, planning, planning

"For us, it made sense to use an experienced integrator, such as Colt", says Van Ootegem. "During the months before the implementation, the integrator took care of a lot of the planning. Then we piloted it for a month in the IT department. That way we could check that everything was fine."

The port uses a hybrid PBX that can be used for both VoIP and traditional calls. "We decided, for example, to have back-up analogue lines for the Harbour Master's Department, to eliminate any risk of downed communications."

And the result of adding SIP Trunking and getting rid of those 30 ISDN lines? While call costs are about the same, eliminating subscription charges saves some 6000 Euros each year. Plus, the port can benefit from all the advantages of VoIP. "We have a kind of unified communications within the organisation, with presence, etc."

He also appreciates the flexibility of VoIP and SIP Trunking. "With VoIP, it's easier to change phone lines if someone moves to another office, for example. Also, in the past, we were connected to a single provider, so we were locked in to a certain extent. Now we can more easily change provider, which will help us get competitive tariffs."

LESSONS LEARNT

Be prepared, and take it step by step

Hans Van Ootegem feels that the switch to SIP Trunking was the right decision, although it has not been without its drawbacks. "We have some problems with quality of calls, i.e.; an 'echo'. But that's really an annoyance, not a problem."

He continues, "SIP Trunking is definitely something companies should look into as an alternative to fixed lines, especially if you have multiple sites, like we do. But you have to be well prepared. By piloting, you can reveal if there are problems with call quality, dropped communications or slow speeds. These can be caused by different factors, so you need to get them solved before you implement the new system throughout your entire organisation."