HOCKEY TEAM SCORES WITH IP PHONE SYSTEM

John Spade says the team's new Cisco Business Edition 6000 VoIP system offers reliability and convenience that weren't possible through the old PBX system that was replaced.

The Florida Panthers replace an ailing phone system with Cisco Unified Communications, resulting in improved reliability and mobility.

At a Glance

COMPANY: Sunrise Sports and Entertainment

LOCATION: Sunrise, Fla.

EMPLOYEES: 250

I.T. STAFF: 3

BRIEF HISTORY: Sunrise Sports and Entertainment owns the Florida Panthers professional hockey team and is licensed to operate the BB&T Center, a sports and entertainment venue owned by Broward County, Fla., that hosts more than 100 events a year, including concerts, monster truck shows and other family events. The hockey club, an expansion franchise in 1993, finished with a strong 38–29–15 record during the 2014—2015 season.

The Florida Panthers didn't look to skate on thin ice when it came to the team's old phone system.

Last year, the major league hockey team's 16-year-old PBX suffered service issues with increasing frequency, often once a week. Typically, downtime was short and minor, but nonetheless frustrating to employees when, for instance, a portion of the phones at the team's BB&T Center headquarters would suddenly lose its dial tone. Most times, the IT department didn't require technical expertise to get the arena's phones up and running again.

"Someone would go into the phone room, see that lights were out in a particular section and, if you physically hit it, usually they would come back on," says John Spade, who joined the Panthers last spring as vice president of IT.

Last summer, a large electrical storm knocked out the phone system entirely. The IT department was able to acquire spare parts for the old system, which the manfacturer had stopped making in 2001, but the antiquated system also did not offer simple, modern-day amenities such as caller ID. When the electrical storm knocked out the system, it made the puchase an easy decision.

"We had to source parts from liquidators to get it back online," Spade says. "There would be only so many more times that was achievable, so it was time to upgrade."

The hockey franchise purchased Cisco Systems' Business Edition 6000, an all-in-one Voice over IP (VoIP) solution that includes Cisco Unified Communications Manager for call processing and Cisco Unity Connection for voice messaging running on Cisco UCS servers. The team also bought about 200 new Cisco IP phones.

ZERO

The amount of downtime the Arena Operating Company has experienced since installing a new Cisco Unified Communications phone system in September 2014

A New World

Cisco's new communications infrastructure, aimed at small and medium-sized businesses with 25 to 1,000 employees, provides executives, office employees, front office staff and coaches the reliability, uptime and features they need to communicate effectively, Spade says.

Phone service is a necessity for almost any business, and that's no different for the Panthers: During hockey season, fans call every day with questions, while departments such as group sales and corporate partnerships rely on phones as part of their daily operations.

The team's parent company — Sunrise Sports and Entertainment — also manages the BB&T Center, which regularly hosts concerts, monster truck rallies and other family-oriented events. The new system not only improves worker productivity and customer service, but also provides reliable communication for league officials during hockey games, and for entertainers and their staff before and after shows.

For Spade's three-person IT team, the new Cisco UC phone system is easier to manage. They can deploy new phone lines quickly when needed, ultimately saving time and money.

"It's been working perfectly," he says. "No regular maintenance has been required."

Cloud Versus On-Premises Deployment

When Spade was hired to manage the Panthers' IT operations in April 2014 — about three months before that fated electrical storm — he says he knew the phone system would prove to be an issue. One of the first things he did was explore new telephony options, calling his CDW account manager for help in identifying the most appropriate phone solution for the team's business and communications needs.

CDW's account managers, solution architects and engineers in South Florida knew the Panthers' IT infrastructure extremely well because they had helped the team with a smaller Wi-Fi installation in 2012 and, later, a major network equipment upgrade.

The CDW team met with Spade to perform a site survey and fully spell out the team's telephony needs. During a series of meetings, they presented Spade with several cloud-based and on-premises solutions, explaining the pros and cons of each.

Spade considered a hosted VoIP solution, but preferred an in-house Cisco UC phone system because it was more practical for the team's requirements. IT was already migrating email to the cloud, so he didn't want to find himself in a situation where, if the Internet

went down, employees could lose both email and voice communications.

"I wanted one of our primary services to be onsite, so if Internet services are down, my users still have a way to communicate," he says.

Spade proposed the new Cisco phone system to management, and it was winding its way through the approval process when the big lightning storm hit.

"We had received the final quote from CDW, and it was on the CEO's desk to be signed, but we were going back and forth discussing the timing of it," he recalls. "When the electrical storm knocked out the system for four days, it made the purchase an easy decision."

Strategic Migration

Spade is well versed on Cisco and VoIP technology, but because he and his small IT team were so busy with the arena's summer concerts and events, he tapped CDW to install the equipment over a two-month window.

The IT department first upgraded the arena's wiring, most of which was CAT 3, so several floors were upgraded to CAT 6 to support the new phone system. With the cabling done, a CDW engineer installed the Cisco Business Edition 6000 with redundancy in mind, deploying two Cisco UCS C220 servers and installing Cisco's voice applications on each. The engineer also installed two Cisco 2900 Series Integrated Services Routers, which link the phone system to the phone service provider.

Joel Suárez, the CDW UC solution architect who designed the system, says that redundancy is important: If one server or router goes down, the other will ensure the phone service stays up and running.

"It provides high availability end to end," Suárez says.

The Cisco 7800 Series IP phones were easy to deploy, Spade says. The new switches support Power over Ethernet, allowing the team to use an Ethernet connection to power the phones.

The overall design included Cisco VG Series analog gateways, which allowed the team to connect 100 existing analog phones to the new system. A few locations in the arena proved too challenging or too expensive for adding new CAT 6 cabling, so the older phones were redeployed there, Spade says.

Spade's IT team assisted the CDW engineer throughout the installation, which helped familiarize them with the new phone system. Everything went live in September, with no problems, Spade says.

"We did a lot of testing after hours and helped to make sure everything cut over properly," CDW Account Manager Alex Miles says. "It was a smooth engagement."
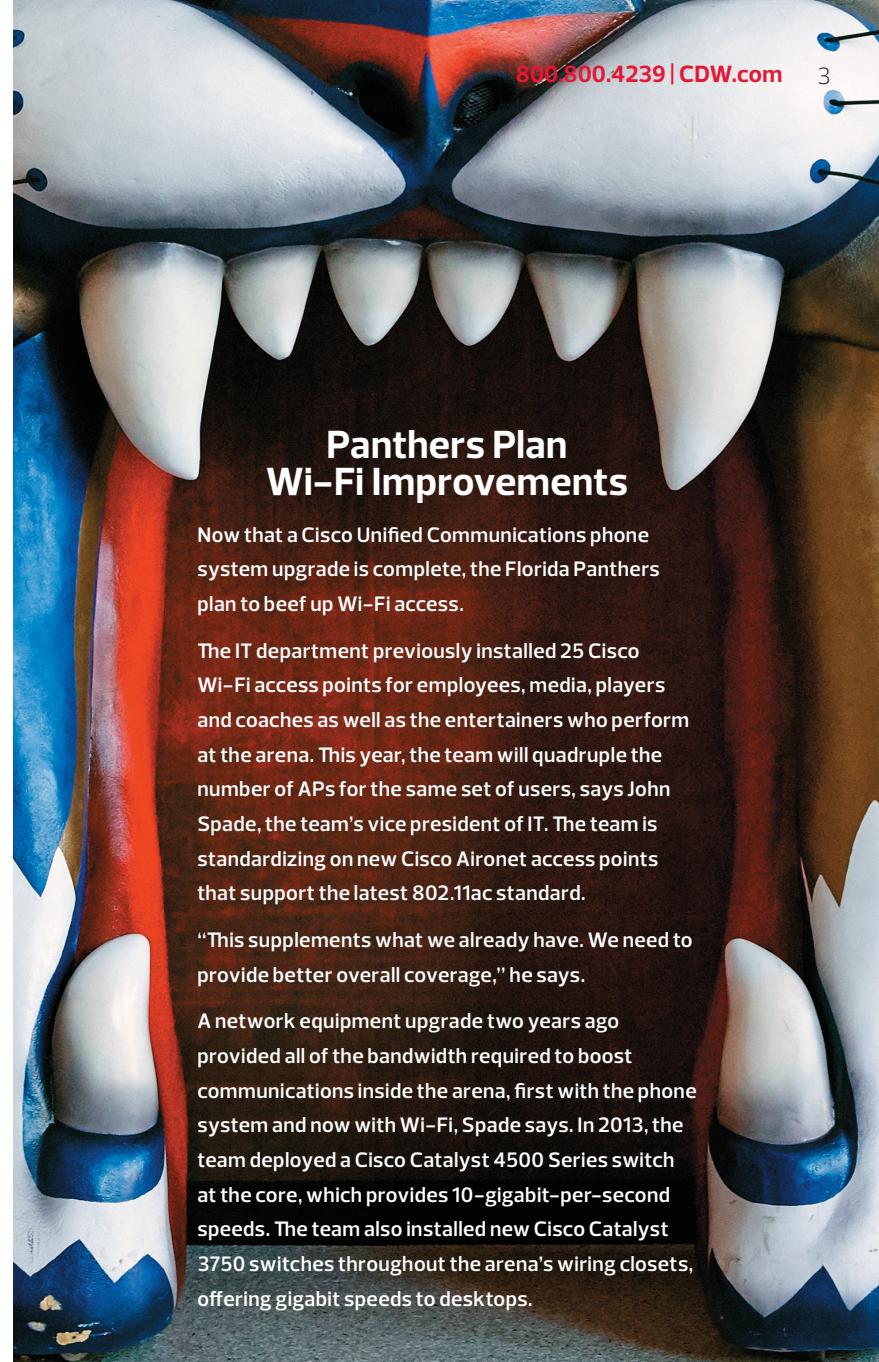
Panthers Plan Wi-Fi Improvements

Now that a Cisco Unified Communications phone system upgrade is complete, the Florida Panthers plan to beef up Wi-Fi access.

The IT department previously installed 25 Cisco Wi-Fi access points for employees, media, players and coaches as well as the entertainers who perform at the arena. This year, the team will quadruple the number of APs for the same set of users, says John Spade, the team's vice president of IT. The team is standardizing on new Cisco Aironet access points that support the latest 802.11ac standard.

"This supplements what we already have. We need to provide better overall coverage," he says.

A network equipment upgrade two years ago provided all of the bandwidth required to boost communications inside the arena, first with the phone system and now with Wi-Fi, Spade says. In 2013, the team deployed a Cisco Catalyst 4500 Series switch at the core, which provides 10-gigabit-per-second speeds. The team also installed new Cisco Catalyst 3750 switches throughout the arena's wiring closets, offering gigabit speeds to desktops.

Big Gains

To further ensure a seamless transition, CDW also provided classroom training, sharing the ins and outs of the new system's features and capabilities with employees.

Many take phone features such as caller ID or a mute button for granted today, but that wasn't the case for Panthers employees who long went without the ability to view their call history, for instance, or enjoy other standard features available in modern phones.

Adelyn Biedenbach, the Panthers' coordinator of digital media and communications, fields a lot of press calls on deadline, so the ability to see missed calls was hugely important to her, she says. Her favorite new feature is unified messaging, which allows her to check voicemail from her smartphone's email inbox. She's rarely at her desk, often out at the team's practice facility or events, so unified messaging offers her greater mobility.

> ## "It seems like a simple thing, but having caller ID and being able to see your missed calls are probably what the users are most excited about."
> — John Spade, Vice President of IT, Florida Panthers hockey team

"When we get phone calls about a press conference, an announcement or questions about practice times, it just makes it a lot easier to manage those calls and answer in the most timely manner possible," Biedenbach says.

Delwin Liranzo, the team's group events manager, says he appreciates the new system's user-friendliness. He sometimes makes 80 to 100 calls a day as he sells group packages, so the ease of use allows him to work faster.

"Before, everyone's phones were different. A button on one phone meant something else on another, so when I was starting out, I didn't know how to transfer or put someone on hold because it wasn't the same for every phone," he says. "Now it's so much easier."

When he's on speakerphone during a conference call, Liranzo says the sound quality also seems much improved: "It's night-and-day better."

Helping IT

The new Cisco UC phone system is easier for the IT staff to manage and maintain. Spade can use web-based software to configure and manage the system, adding new users and phone lines as needed.

"Because it's network-based, we can add new phone lines or move phones without having to physically rewire," he says.

That makes a huge difference when the arena hosts concerts or special events and additional phones are needed: Perhaps a musician wants a phone line in the dressing rooms, or during college basketball season, teams may request phones set up courtside at their benches.

"It used to be challenging having to wire each line individually and connect it. Now we just plug it into the network," Spade says.

This past June, the arena hosted the hockey league's draft of amateur players, featuring 30 professional teams, 1,500 prospects and their families along with about 500 media members. Spade's team turned to a Session Initiation Protocol trunk provider to temporarily add several hundred extra phone lines.

Essentially, Cisco's UC Manager software connected to the external VoIP lines over the Internet — and it all became part of the arena's phone system.

"We can add as many lines as we have Internet bandwidth for. And phone calls don't take much bandwidth, so as far as we're concerned, it's infinite," he says.

Moving forward, Spade says he will consider adding call center software if employees need it. He's also testing Cisco Jabber, a collaboration application that allows users to use instant messaging or make phone calls from their desktop computers.

Overall, Spade says he's happy with the new phone system. He also reports satisfaction with CDW, which proved invaluable to him and his team throughout the process, from planning, purchase and delivery of the equipment to installation.

"We could not have implemented this system without CDW's help," Spade says. "They gave us great pricing and wonderful service. They sold us a solution that fit our budget and the needs of our workforce, and they got it done in a timely fashion."

Steve Craft