Cintas pulls off an IT infrastructure upgrade and transforms the employee and customer experience

verizon

The customer

Headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, Cintas has been in operation for more than 90 years and has approximately 40,000 employees. The company operates roughly 460 facilities across the United States and Canada, including five manufacturing facilities and 11 distribution centers.

While it began primarily as a provider of uniform rentals, the company has since expanded into a range of divisions that include first aid and safety, fire protection, industrial tile and carpet cleaning and more. The cross section of industries it supports spans retail, manufacturing and healthcare, among others.

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The challenge: complex business operations

Cintas sends its essential workers out to deliver products to almost every kind of business imaginable, from large companies to small mom and pop shops. Providing the best level of service possible means those workers need to have fast and reliable connections to teams working across its offices, plants and distribution centers.

For some business operations, the task is simple. But Cintas isn't always working with standard conditions — a driver may need to be reached while making a delivery in the basement of a hospital, for instance, or working in a rural area miles away from the nearest city.

If a call to one of those drivers cuts out or is dropped, it creates massive inefficiencies for the Cintas team. Drivers might need to leave the customer's premises and go outside or back to their car. Putting off those calls isn't an option, given the urgency with which customers might reach out to Cintas for help.

"If you're doing business with a restaurant and they had a busy day, they might need 25 more aprons and 75 more kitchen towels because they had a big group come in," Mike Thompson, Cintas' Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, explained. "The drivers may or may not have that inventory on their trucks. That means they might have to contact their service manager and send a note to call a plant and make a special order."

On other occasions, customers might call soon after a Cintas driver has left, Thompson said. Think of a hotel manager who forgot to tell the driver that they had hired new staff and will need uniforms as part of the onboarding process the following week.

"If that call goes to voicemail, the driver may not get it in time," he said. "Those uniforms need to be ordered, sent to a distribution center and have the right emblems put on them. You need all the time you can get to service that customer properly within a week."

Other issues or questions will come in through a customer request form (CRF) sent by e-mail or text. If a CRF comes in on a Tuesday and a driver isn't going to be serving them again until Thursday, the customer still wants to know whether Cintas will be able to help them, Thompson said.

"I really look at it as customer relationship building and making sure that when they need something, that we're on it," he said.

Cintas not only has to stay on top of these requests but also has to do so at scale. Thompson estimates its drivers complete more than 15,000 routes each week.

15,000 routes each week

The variables to consider include whether inventory for particular orders is available, pricing updates and any details that are specific to a particular customer — it could be as granular as delivering five sets of shirts and pants for five wears, along with mats, towels and air fresheners.

"It's hard for a driver and a customer to really juggle all of that without some nice mechanism that connects that communication," he said.

On the front end, drivers were struggling. Instead of using smartphones, they relied on what Thompson described as "portable route computers" — brick-sized handheld devices that would sync up to other applications at night. However, they often couldn't hold all the necessary customer data drivers needed, he said.

Behind the scenes, Cintas was also modernizing the technology that would help it run the rest of its business. An enterprise resource planning (ERP) system would integrate software applications across multiple business units and functions.

Like most ERP implementations, Cintas had been rolling out the deployment in stages, beginning with its first aid business unit and then its rental division, which represents approximately 88% of its business. However, this also raised questions about whether Cintas' communications infrastructure was truly ready.

"A lot of interaction goes from customer-specific data back to our system. We needed a reliable cellular network to do that," Thompson said. "We needed a very strong network and partner — one with whom we could work very closely to figure out how to enhance the communication back and forth from our devices, back to SAP and then the other systems that we have. That way, our drivers could be more real-time and online."

The solution: an IT infrastructure upgrade

Cintas had already worked with Verizon to transform the wireless side of its business by equipping its drivers with smartphones and providing the national network coverage it needed to serve its highly distributed customer base. Now it was time to take the partnership to a new level with a more holistic IT infrastructure upgrade.

"As we centralize all operations on one ERP system, it's important our locations have a reliable, fast, flexible network that is also secure," said Matt Hough, Cintas' Vice President and Chief Information Officer. "We had to make sure we could handle the data requirements, to transact all the operations with the plants and give our teams dashboards to become more efficient."

Verizon collaborated with Hough and his team to determine the full range of technologies and managed solutions that could increase the Cintas team's agility and performance across the entire organization.

This included cEdge, a software-defined wide-area network (SD WAN) to connect all its locations and ensure access

diversity and network redundancy as part of a robust and reliable network solution.

Verizon also provided Dedicated Internet, MPLS and Broadband to support connectivity, while LTE Business Internet provides critical backup as Cintas transitions to a parallel network. Unified Communications and Collaboration as a Service (UCaaS), meanwhile, would help facilitate conversations between various parts of the business as customer needs arose.

Verizon also provided Cintas with Managed WAN, Managed LAN, Network Engineering and PMO services. These solutions help give Hough and his team peace of mind that critical areas of the business, such as its distribution centers, will be able to maintain their 99.99% reliability standards.

For Hough, the decision to make an IT infrastructure upgrade was simple. "We can't afford to have them go down," he said.
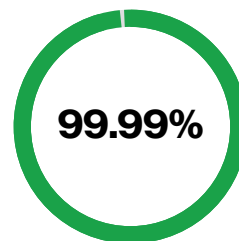
99.99% Reliability standards using Verizon's Managed WAN, Managed LAN, Network Engineering and PMO services

The results

Verizon's network and managed services have helped Cintas pursue an IT infrastructure upgrade that has transformed communications across 400 locations in its rental division alone.

For Thompson, the partnership with Verizon that began with its wireless needs paved the way for the success Cintas has achieved in connecting its entire team of essential workers, and particularly its drivers, to its ERP.

"We found we needed someone stronger in the cellular space. Clearly, Verizon's coverage was superior. The Verizon team also did a phenomenal job helping us define that usage and how we could roll it out over time," he said.

"This wireline project was really an evolution of that first step of helping us with our routes, and then helping us take a harder look at what we could do to enhance the communications within our brick and mortar locations."

The benefits Cintas has experienced as a result of the IT infrastructure upgrade have been extensive.

Improved data management and collaboration

A single Cintas customer might work or place orders with multiple divisions within the company. That means Cintas needs to be well-coordinated in its back-office processes, and it also needs to ensure that drivers can quickly answer questions by connecting to one of their peers, or to a plant or distribution center.

"The customer just looks at us as Cintas," Thompson explained. "We needed a better way to enhance that, and that connectivity and reliability are very important for that to occur as we share data back and forth."

Enhanced business continuity and resiliency

When a location goes down, it doesn't just impede the ability of Cintas employees to do their jobs. When drivers can't get the information they need while out on routes, it can have a devastating effect on Cintas customers who are counting on the company to deliver everything from uniforms to first aid products.

"We only have a certain amount of time to recover and to get garments back through the system so they are washed and prepared," Thompson explained. "We have a constant flow of goods, and they are often personal to the wearer. Having a single point of failure is vital. The impact of an outage can hit you not a whole week later but often within three days because you need to work with plant partners."

Unified communications is one way Cintas helps ensure that potential points of failure don't spell interruptions in service for their essential workers. UCaaS guarantees secure connections and provides simplified collaboration with a range of functionalities, including instant messaging, voice calling and voicemail. This enhanced ability to collaborate also means Cintas drivers can expedite resolutions whenever an issue does arise.

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Opportunities to expand and adopt next-gen innovations

Although Cintas has already made huge strides with its ERP deployment, its IT infrastructure upgrade with Verizon means the company is in a better position to explore additional customer experience and business improvements.

These include using cloud computing to dynamically manage IT resources and connecting to the Internet of Things (IoT) to gather and analyze more data in real time. Thompson said this is where Verizon's consultative approach as a managed service partner has proven particularly valuable.

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"We can grab a ton of data, but the question is what is the customer interested in and willing to pay for? What data will make us more efficient? Verizon has been great at finding different examples in other industries of how to build upon our connectivity model and what applications might be relevant," he said.

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Hough agreed. "As we push further into the capabilities of our new ERP system, we anticipate the data requirements are going to be such that it will be even more important to make sure the reliability is there from a network perspective," he said.

Manage IT resources through cloud computing

Analyze data in real time by connecting to IoT

having to purchase additional networking equipment. This network approach will also make it easier for Cintas to scale its networking needs based on changes that take place across its business.

For Hough, Verizon's NaaS solution can help Cintas be ready for future mergers and acquisitions or other needs that will emerge in the future. He described it as not merely a way to access technology but also a way to access the invaluable industry knowledge and best practices of Verizon's team.

"It means not always having to train everyone at Cintas, but instead leverage Verizon's staff and their expertise," he said. "The flexibility and efficiency of NaaS mean you can get to the end results you want quicker."

NaaS can allow Cintas to augment its IT team with Verizon, Hough added. It's a decision the company feels confident about, given the results of its partnership to date.

"What we appreciated was Verizon's ability to look at the network wired service from an application perspective," said Hough. "We believe this gives us the best chance to not only get all the efficiencies and cost savings out of the network but a lot more reliability and speed that we need for today and tomorrow."

Next steps: network-as-a-service

Cintas plans to build upon the success of its IT infrastructure upgrade by taking advantage of Verizon's Network-as-a-Service (NaaS) offering.

Like with software-as-a-service (SaaS) tools, instead of deploying applications locally, NaaS can give Cintas on-demand access to Verizon's capabilities through a secure, flexible, subscription-based model.

This means Cintas may be able to quickly make changes to virtualized services and try new technology without

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