

EAC uses IP Phone as foundation for new corporate technology vision.

Deployment of IP telephony solution prepares EAC units in Singapore for voice & data in near future

The East Asiatic Company traces its origin to 1884, when H.N. Andersen, a Danish sea captain, established a trading company in Bangkok as an anchor for his vision of a vibrant network between Europe and the Far East. From that outpost in Thailand, the firm quickly grew into a global trading concern that, at its peak, employed more than 20,000 employees and was present in more than 50 countries.

Today, EAC employs about 6,000 people and operates EAC Foods (South America), EAC Nutrition (Asia, Middle East) and Industrial Ingredient (South East Asia) businesses in addition to a premium international Moving and

Relocation company (Asia). The company is listed on the Copenhagen Stock Exchange and, in a homecoming of sorts, moved its Group Operational Centre to Singapore in 1998. Similarly, the geographic focus has been turned onto Asia, the origin and historic strength of the group.

One would expect a group as large and as diverse as EAC, for ease of coordination and control, to dictate policies governing the use of technology by its various country operations and business. But this is not the case, according to Sudhir Abdul Rahman, Group Director, Group Information Services.



“Only a couple of things are controlled from the corporate office: corporate e-mail and security policy. Countries and business units have a free hand when it comes to choosing technology solutions to suit their needs. Each business has its own IT structure so our role here at Group Information Services is more that of a consultant,” he said.

Nonetheless, there have been discussions within the group on two major projects that will impact all of EAC’s country

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operations and businesses. The first will see the implementation of a new private network to support the centralised services for the Moving and Relocation business, while the second will involve moving to a SAP shared service center for the Nutrition business (three of the major sites [Malaysia, Thailand and China] have their own SAP set-up). When these plans start to take shape over the next 18 to 24 months, EAC’s operations in Singapore will be among the most well-prepared, thanks to its deployment of the Cisco IP Phone.

IP Telephony More Sensible Than PABX

“We relocated to our present premises in November 2001 and saw the move as an opportunity to start afresh IT-wise. The new premises house the regional office of the nutrition business, the local industrial ingredients office and the corporate office, and we managed to get buy-in from all three to adopt the Cisco IP Phone. So when the possibility of deploying voice over the new private network being discussed arises, we can confidently say we’re already enabled,” said Mr. Sudhir.

EAC’s original plan was to use a traditional PABX at the new premises, but Mr. Sudhir and his team found that, for the size of the physical space and the number of people involved, there was not much of a cost difference between that and an IP telephony solution. The chance to use more modern technology for voice needs was also a factor, and a final decision was made to use an IP telephony solution.

When it was evaluating proposals from vendors of IP telephony solutions, EAC focused less on the product itself but more on the vendor’s ability to implement the solution, according to Mr. Sudhir. Two vendors were evaluated: Cisco and another one that has its legacy in traditional telephony systems.

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IBM, which eventually implemented the 60 Cisco IP Phone units at the new EAC premises in Singapore, entered the picture quite by accident. “At about the same time, we were just starting a global procurement exercise with IBM, and it turned out IBM was also a Cisco reseller and was itself installing Cisco IP Phones at its new premises in Changi South. And the good news was the IBM team of engineers putting in the phones at Changi South was the one that would be doing the installation for us.”

Users took to the Cisco IP Phone very quickly, Mr. Sudhir reported. “To them, it just an appliance, which is good, as our intent has been to shield them from the complexity of the technology. There’s extensive use of the phone directory and we’re now seeing more value usage — and all without much push from the IT function.”

Coming Up: More Applications

With their colleagues all settled in the new office and using the Cisco IP Phone, Mr. Sudhir and his team are now working on adding more functionality to the IP telephony platform. EAC is exploring various applications with Cisco in the area of real time information delivery such as stock information, access control systems applications for its unattended reception, unified messaging and employee self services applications.



EAC also plans to introduce unified messaging, which allows voice mail over e-mail and vice versa, by the end of 2002, and has other self-service applications on the drawing board.

It may be just several months old but the Cisco IP telephony solution used by EAC in Singapore has already attracted attention from the group's operational units outside Singapore.

"We've had visitors who are impressed at what can be done with the IP Phone. But we're not hard-selling it to them as we believe that seeing is believing and that there has to be complete buy-in. But when the other units choose to adopt the solution as well, and when the new corporate private network becomes operational, that's when we'll see significant cost savings from the consolidation of data and voice into a single network infrastructure," said Mr. Sudhir.



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