

CENTERFOLD

BY KELLY JACKSON HIGGINS

TINDALL CORP.

Concrete Company Trades Travel for Web Meetings

As soon as Tindall Corp. began testing Web conferencing over its WAN, the helpdesk lines lit up. ERP users were calling to complain that their application had slowed to a crawl.

Tindall's IT group had been rotating a 3-D CAD drawing over the WiredRed e/pop Web conferencing application to simulate how engineers collaborate on a design. But the hefty drawing and e/pop sucked up so much of the frame relay WAN's bandwidth that it squeezed out the enterprise resource planning traffic.

"We saw right away that Web conferencing wasn't going to work over a 512-Kbps link between one location and another," says Steve Flacy, IT director at Tindall, a \$150 million privately held maker of precast and prestressed concrete systems used in parking decks, schools and prison cells.

To accommodate the new Web conferencing solution and ensure that it wouldn't disrupt critical applications, Flacy and his team had to redesign the company's WAN. Previously, each site used its frame relay connection to Tindall's Spartanburg, S.C., headquarters to share the company's sole T1 Internet pipe. Under the new architecture, each site now has its own high-speed Internet connection for Web conferencing and other Web traffic. The network makeover was included in the project that upper management later approved (see "The Hard Sell," below).

In addition to e/pop, Tindall bought DSL connections for each of its three branch offices last September, as well as new Cisco PIX firewalls, Websense monitoring and security software, and server hardware. The new architecture not only improves per-

The Hard Sell

A DOLLAR FOR EVERY DIME

IT WAS A DONE DEAL after one meeting: Steve Flacy talked costs and benefits with Tindall Corp.'s president, CEO and vice president of information services, and they all gave Web conferencing the green light.

"Because we have a \$500,000 per year travel budget—much of which would be eliminated by using e/pop—it was easy to sell," recalls Flacy, IT director at the \$150 million designer and manufacturer of concrete systems. "Any time I can demonstrate that an investment will bring a much greater return, it's sellable."

Tindall's CEO jumped at the idea when Flacy and his boss, Tindall's controller, proposed the WiredRed e/pop Web conferencing package. "Our CEO didn't even flinch," Flacy says. "He really wanted this."

It helped that Flacy had already tested the software thoroughly and worked out the bandwidth kinks. The overall project involved Cisco PIX firewalls, Websense software and server hardware, as well as high-speed Internet connections for the company's branch offices in Biloxi, Miss., Conley, Ga., and Petersburg, Va. These sites and the company's Spartanburg, S.C., headquarters each run e/pop over their Internet connections except for local conferences, which use the LAN. The project cost

\$45,000, including 10 concurrent licenses for e/pop.

Flacy pitched ROI this way: If Web conferencing saves just 20 percent—\$100,000 in travel costs per year—the initial investment is paid off within six months. "Thereafter, the annual renewal cost is \$10,000—you get at least a dollar for every dime

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invested," he says. Flacy also brought in the big guns—commitments from Tindall department heads to use e/pop in lieu of traveling.

The next big thing for Tindall is a new ERP system. Its main ERP system is old, and there are separate "islands" of ERP technology scattered around the company. "We want to bring those islands into one ERP system," Flacy says. "But that cannot be done in [the ERP app] without heavy modification."

IT will have to select and then pitch an all-new ERP package. Flacy expects the big challenge won't be selling the ERP project to top brass, but implementing it.

formance, it also helps Tindall secure outgoing Internet traffic and usage.

"Internet access is much faster now," Flacy says. "And it lets us control the times of day users can access certain sites."

Tindall spent about \$45,000 on the hardware and software needed for the WAN upgrade. If all goes well with uptake of Web conferencing, Tindall will save \$100,000 to \$200,000 in employee travel this year. So far, about a quarter of the company's users have conferenced using e/pop, roughly the same number of workers who travel regularly.

NO MORE FREQUENT-FLIER MILES

Flacy began exploring collaborative workgroup software options last year after the company started a campaign to reduce travel, which was becoming costly and time-consuming. The goal was to let teams of Tindall engineers, drafters and salespeople work together on projects while remaining at their own desks.

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The tipping point was when Tindall hired an engineer to select the company's next-generation

3-D CAD system. His job was to help teams of engineers at each Tindall site evaluate two competing 3-D software packages from two industry consortia and choose the best app for the company. The evaluation process required a huge investment—tens of thousands of dollars to participate in the Tekla Consortium and license its tool, for instance—as well as lots of hands-on time with the software.

In addition to consortium fees, Tindall would have had to shell out \$28,000 in travel costs just to let the project leader meet with the rest of the company's engineers. With e/pop, the project leader now works out of his home, connecting with his colleagues using the Web conferencing application.

"They do full 3-D rotations of an object within a drawing, and it's visible to everyone else on the conference," Flacy says.

Most of Tindall's engineers aren't so gung-ho about the software just yet, Flacy says. It's been popular among salespeople, however, and of course, the IT group likes to use it. One team that sells Tindall concrete products to corrections departments meets weekly through e/pop, running Excel, Word and PowerPoint applications along with Web cameras so the partici-

[15 MINUTES]

Steve Flacy



57, is director of IT at Tindall Corp. and uses Web conferencing daily to collaborate with his IT colleagues. He's been in IT for 29 years and with Tindall for 16.

Most bizarre IT inquiry: "From a fellow IT manager: One of his users wanted to know why, if the data was

changed in the system, the report that was printed several months ago still has the same data."

What my co-workers don't know about me: "I worked as a professional rock musician for 11 years. In the late '60s, I joined the Nightcrawlers ('Little Black Egg' was their one hit) in Cincinnati. In the mid-'70s, I was based in Nashville with a group called Sweetheart (pronounced Humphrey Bogart-style). Our guitarist, Adrian Belew, went on to play with Frank Zappa, King Crimson, The Talking Heads and David Bowie."

Regrets: "I haven't had enough time to be a 'salesman' for e/pop."

Favorite team: "The Gamecocks, because both my wife and son graduated from the University of South Carolina."

Best geek joke: "The one about the computer programmer in a disabled airplane. He took one of the last two parachutes. As he exited the plane, he apologized to the remaining two passengers—a Boy Scout and an elderly reverend—stating that he was the smartest man in the world, and that his company would fail without him. The reverend turned to the Boy Scout and said, 'I have lived a long and wonderful life, so I want you to take the last parachute.' The Boy Scout said, 'Don't worry about it, Reverend, the smartest man in the world just jumped from this plane wearing my backpack.'"

Favorite hangout: "Home."

Work quirk: "It bothers me when someone presumes to already know what I will say."

If you were stranded on an island, would you rather be stuck with Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or Larry Ellison? "None of the above."

What really makes you rant: "Listening to someone professing to be a victim of society."

In my car CD player now: "An Eagles CD."

Actor who should play me in a film: "Christopher Walken. He shows confusion well."

Favorite comfort food: "Cereal."

After hours: "Playing rock 'n' roll."

pants can see one another. The video portion isn't mandatory, and not all users are comfortable with it, Flacy says.

In a typical e/pop meeting, a conference leader schedules his or her session through Microsoft Outlook—much like reserving a conference room—and assigns a conference name and pass-

'We still haven't convinced everyone to abandon travel in favor of e/pop.'

word for participants. Any Tindall users or business partners with that information can join in through their own Internet

connections. There's a lightweight client required that works with Internet Explorer. Tindall users at headquarters go directly to the e/pop server housed there; remote users access it over the Internet.

Tindall doesn't use e/pop's built-in SSL and TLS (Transport Layer Security) features. Flacy says the company's layered security of firewalls, Websense and password authentication is plenty.

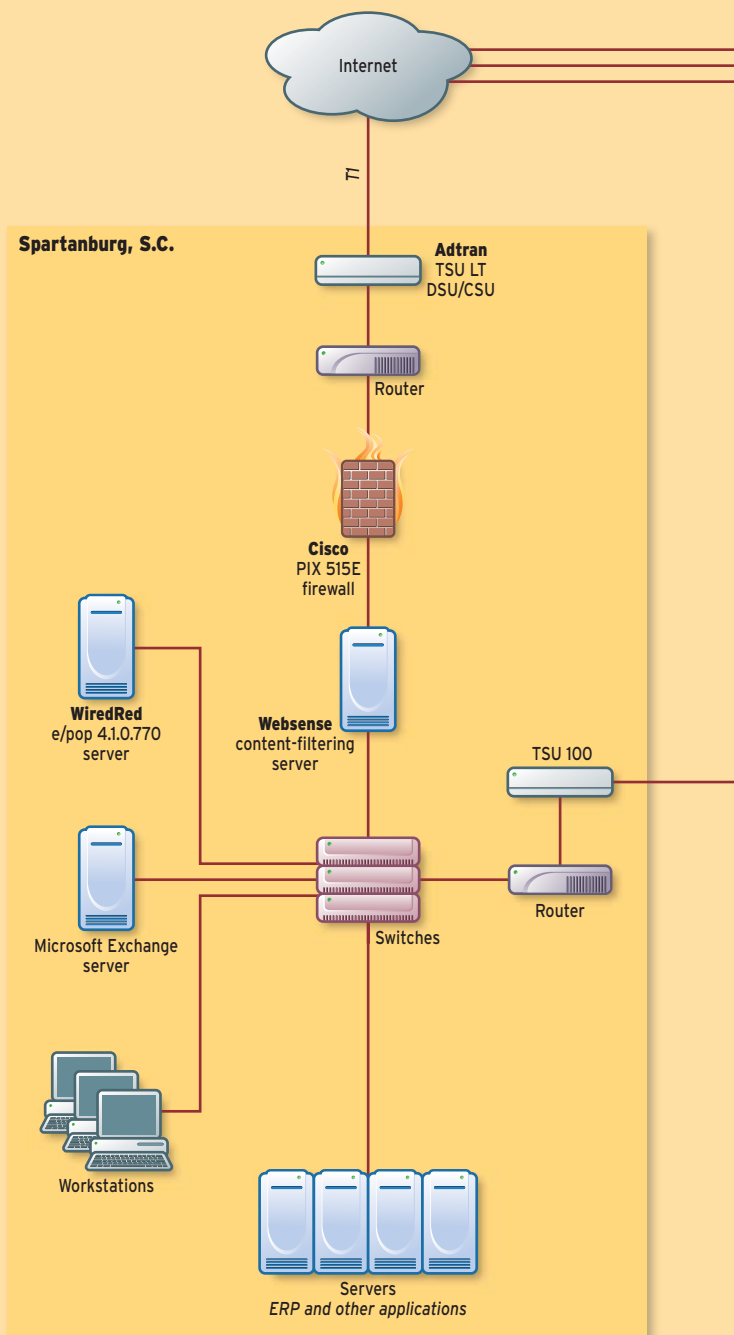
NO-SHOWS

Not all Tindall employees are using the Web conferencing system. "We still haven't been able to convince everyone to abandon travel when it can be handled with e/pop," Flacy says. It's a touchy subject because some employees, for instance, chose their jobs in part for the travel.

Although installing e/pop onto the Windows NT4 server took only 15 minutes, the deployment didn't go without a hitch. For instance, Tindall found that an earlier version of e/pop didn't run well over wireless. When one of its drafters joined an e/pop Web conference from his hotel wireless link, his transmission kept failing.

"He would have to exit e/pop, then come back in and restart the session," Flacy says. "We're not sure what caused it, but it was a couple of e/pop versions ago."

Meanwhile, IT has been using e/pop to evaluate a new ERP application to replace its aging ERP system. Each ERP vendor meeting, for example, is conducted for the far-flung IT group through e/pop, and the IT group also stores video images of the vendor presentations for accountability reasons. "So if we decide to purchase their product, we can say, 'This is what you said,'" Flacy says. **NWC**



TINDALL REBUILT ITS WAN WITH NEW FIREWALLS AND SECURITY DEVICES AS WELL AS HIGH-SPEED INTERNET LINKS AT ITS BRANCH SITES TO SUPPORT THE COMPANY'S NEW WEB CONFERENCING APPLICATION.

Tell Us About Your Network

and we may profile it in a future issue. Send e-mail to centerfold@nwc.com.

Tindall Corp., Spartanburg, S.C.

