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VeriCenter Delivers International IT at Its Best for Berlitz

PROBLEM

With a vast number of languages offered through its global Language Centers around the world, Berlitz is the leading source for proven and effective language instruction for business or personal development. Founded in 1878, Berlitz International, Inc. operates more than 500 language centers in over 60 countries.

Berlitz empowers individuals through language and cross-cultural services, removing barriers in business while helping the world to communicate. Its global, geographically dispersed organizational structure naturally creates significant IT challenges that encompass storage, processing, transfer, security, retrieval of information and many more on-demand processes.

Like many other companies, in the late 1990s Berlitz completed an exhaustive Y2K project that required the upgrade of every server. That was a watershed event that demanded the full attention of every member of the Berlitz IT team. Following that experience, Sean Power, Berlitz's Director of Strategic Technology, said the company realized it had to find a more manageable, cost-effective, long-term solution to its IT infrastructure needs, so its IT team could focus on more strategic business issues that would contribute more value to the bottom line.

As it considered its options, Power said Berlitz realized that it faced several substantial challenges in trying to manage and support IT infrastructure in-house for such a disparate global enterprise. For instance, capital turnover related to the recurring expense of field equipment support and maintenance is prohibitive.

In the late 1990s, each field location had its own independent technical environment with its own unique support requirements. That was a problem, since historically Berlitz's corporate IT support services have been centrally and regionally located, with minimal or non-existent local support resources at the local office level.

Also, like many other global companies over the past two decades, Berlitz developed a custom application to manage the unique operational needs of its geographically dispersed business. The internally delivered Language Center Management System (LCMS) was deployed via a traditional client/server model. Meanwhile, the highly distributed nature of Berlitz's IT operations required each office to maintain a local client/server environment, while demanding highly repetitive support activities to manage local environment and application upgrades as well as periodic data collection and consolidation activities.

Bottom line – the burden of upgrading and modifying the LCMS application was taxing on the staff, the infrastructure and internal processes. Perhaps worst of all, Berlitz IT staff members found themselves spending the vast majority of their time caring for computer equipment, while struggling to find adequate time to support the *people* using the equipment and systems – Berlitz's employees and customers. Part of the global IT challenge was that Berlitz relies upon a large number of employees – most of them part-time instructors – who require sporadic access to IT resources locally on their schedules, not necessarily on a traditional 9-5 business day schedule.

As Berlitz looked to get better efficiencies out of its Global IT infrastructure, it was faced with the daunting task of providing 24x7 support around the world for a wildly disparate set of user needs on the local level. On the regional level, one single region required support that spanned at least 18 hours each day. The problem? Power said meeting the local and regional needs of Berlitz's IT users was extremely challenging for a company whose core value proposition is really language instruction that helps the world communicate – not IT.

In looking at Berlitz's IT challenges at the start of the 21st Century, Power identified two key strategic IT areas that Berlitz needed to address:

- Improve and enhance the support and efficiency of operations
- Improve the availability and efficiency of the IT environment and processes

Power led a global, cross-functional team that was charged with redeveloping the company's outdated existing operations system, LCMS, from the ground-up. This would include replacing LCMS with a comprehensive, enterprise-level centralized system focused on process automation, streamlined communication, and timely access to shared information for management, staff, and customers.

“No other provider was able to meet our detailed criteria for delivering managed services.”

The team took a centralized IT services platform approach, focusing on providing an optimal environment for MAX!, Berlitz's new operations system. MAX! was developed to better bridge the communication gaps within the Berlitz enterprise – between locations, employees, and even customers – by integrating more efficient enterprise and customer process management, and the sharing of information. Power's team also developed a Global Desktop to provide a uniform, highly available field IT environment and services, while at the same time vastly reducing field-deployed computer equipment expenses and maintenance.

SOLUTION

Berlitz engaged VeriCenter, Inc. for managed services that would centrally deliver IT services to global offices from a single world-class facility and further drive secure, reliable, enterprise-level operations. VeriCenter manages all of Berlitz's systems and infrastructure related to MAX!, including middleware and its Disaster Recovery program. This was a particularly difficult challenge on the global level, as Berlitz and VeriCenter had to work through several issues. These included:

- Connections of the Citrix environment
- Going from hundreds of servers to a much more streamlined, managed services approach
- A complex technical environment that included SQL Server clusters
- Geographically distributed database replication
- The incorporation of fail-over systems.

Power said Berlitz selected VeriCenter because it met all of the following criteria:

- A global solution and seamless network
- Server hardware and networking in one contract
- A commitment to deliver service in Europe, Asia and the U.S. – essentially becoming Berlitz's "Data Center for the World"
- Expertise in Citrix so users could access centralized applications using thin clients over low bandwidth sessions
- Hardware and bandwidth neutrality.

"No other provider was able to meet our detailed criteria for delivering managed services," Power said. "Whereas Berlitz used to provide IT infrastructure support to each of its offices across the world, now that responsibility lies with VeriCenter."

Power points out that a truly geographically dispersed team can leverage economies of skill and scale – people, process and technology – especially when the end users have unique demands rooted in disparate languages that are addressed through multiple interfaces around the world.

"Since most of what we do is capacity-based, contingent on the number of customers making transactions, VeriCenter ensures that we have enough bandwidth to manage data upswings," Power said.

RESULTS

VeriCenter helped Berlitz create new processes for migrating its critical application and users to a centrally delivered model. It has realized a comprehensive cost reduction of 20 percent through managed services when compared to what the cost would have been had Berlitz deployed these IT infrastructure services internally. Berlitz also is able to provide the same high level of customer service with VeriCenter's 40 servers versus the 600 it had to manage internally before.

This strategic convergence of the MAX! and VeriCenter IT initiatives is enabling Berlitz to reduce operating costs, enhance uniformity across the board, and increase the availability of the IT environment through centralization, according to Power.

"VeriCenter is crucial to our business," Power said. "Since customers' personal information, grades, financial information, courses and other vital information sit on VeriCenter's infrastructure, we are entrusting the lifeblood and integrity of our business to VeriCenter."

As Berlitz's global expansion of its franchise business grows next to its owned-and-operated offices, it will look to VeriCenter to provide the infrastructure necessary to ensure smooth transitions to other countries and other areas of IT infrastructure services.

"Perhaps the most important result of our relationship with VeriCenter is the fact that we can leave the data center responsibilities with them, so we can focus on our core value proposition of helping the world communicate," Power said.

