Recycled paper packaging giant uses Google Apps to increase productivity, coordinate projects and assist in disaster recovery

At a Glance

What they wanted to do
• Avoid a massive upgrade of an expensive and complex in-house email system.

What they did
• Selected Google Apps for Business for its no-hassle, cloud-based model for email and document sharing and range of collaborative features.

What they accomplished
• Established a reliable, scalable and feature-rich communications and collaboration portal that resulted in improved interaction among employees, contractors and customers.

Organization

Pratt Industries (U.S.A.), Inc., founded in 1948, is among the top players in the recycled paper packaging industry. A sister company to Visy, the top recycled paper-maker in Australia, Pratt is committed to collecting paper from cities, schools, supermarkets, and other locations nationwide and repulping it into box packaging. Pratt, which is headquartered in Conyers, Ga., has 3,500 employees working in more than 70 locations nearly coast-to-coast, including three large mills and numerous warehouses.

Challenge

In November 2009, Pratt's nine-person IT department faced a difficult situation: The company's Microsoft Exchange Server was failing. The system, in place since 1998 when email first was deployed across the company, was operating on an out-of-date service pack and needed a major upgrade. "We were looking at a serious investment in hardware and software licenses," notes Juan Merelo, Technical Services Manager at Pratt.

The IT team had to act fast because email had become an integral part of the business, particularly as a channel for taking orders and interacting with customers. However, IT struggled with the decision to upgrade because users had not been happy with the limitations of Microsoft Exchange, including constricted individual mailbox size and frequent outages. Knowing the heavy capital expenditure cost of a new email system, Pratt was open to test-driving a hosted or cloud-based service. They were in the process of comparing options when the Exchange Server finally gave out completely in early 2010.

Solution

Pratt selected Google Apps for Business for its email needs. Merelo had compared costs against a new on-site Exchange deployment and a hosted Microsoft service. "Google was less by half of even Microsoft's hosted option," Merelo noted. To ensure this was the right direction, IT enlisted the help of a top executive to pilot and champion the project.

By the time the Exchange Server went down, Merelo had charted a migration spanning at least three months. However, the dramatic nature of the outage forced a much speedier rollout. "When the old server crashed, our three-month rollout became literally overnight," he recalls.

Although the IT team was focused on getting 1,867 Gmail accounts up and running, they also deployed Google Docs, Google Sites, Google Chat and other components of Google Apps at the same time. "We started Thursday night and we were done by Saturday morning," Merelo marvels. At first, he notes, some users balked at the switch to Google; but the ease of use, larger inbox size, collaboration tools, and multifunction communication capabilities soon won over even the most die-hard Microsoft Outlook and Office fans.

About Google Apps for Business

Google Apps for Business offers simple, powerful communication and collaboration tools for enterprises of any size—all hosted by Google to streamline setup, minimize maintenance, and reduce IT costs. With Gmail, Google Calendar, and integrated IM, users can stay connected and work together with ease, even in private domains. And, using Google Docs, which includes word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation tools, they can share files and collaborate in real-time, keeping versions organized and available wherever and whenever users work. Google Sites, Google Groups, and Google Video add further capabilities for Web publishing, secure sharing, and video storage and access.

For more information visit
www.google.com/a

"We started the Google Apps deployment Thursday night and we were done by Friday at noon. Google Apps saved two months of work for a Class A engineer, or $60,000."
—Juan Merelo, technical services manager at Pratt Industries

"Before Google, we'd have to put the sales team's request for email validation to the back of the line behind other more pressing projects. Now it's a simple process that gets great results."
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Benefits

Throughout Pratt, Google Apps is improving employee-to-employee, employee-to-contractor, and employee-to-customer interaction. Merelo says he and and his team are seeing Google Apps used in ways they never imagined.

For instance, when parts of Alabama were hard-hit by tornadoes, a Pratt mill went offline. Merelo was unable to talk workers through a recovery strategy over the phone, so he drove several hours to bring the mill back online in person, incurring more than $2,000 in expenses. Shortly thereafter, IT began using the Google Docs drawing feature to sketch out plans for restoring systems. Now, if a facility goes down again, IT teams can easily show users of any skill level step-by-step instructions (including actual photos from the site) for getting the network back up and running. More importantly, this can be done over any device with an Internet connection, so employees can respond and interact from anywhere. In addition to saving on travel expenses and the valuable time of skilled IT staff members, Google Docs will allow the plant to return functionality to offline systems significantly faster, avoiding serious impact on revenue or production.

The team also used Google Apps to capture details involving circuit switchovers at more than 60 locations when Pratt swapped its plant network connections from AT&T to Masergy Communications. Rather than flying an employee to each of the more than 60 locales undergoing the changeover, Pratt developed a spreadsheet for the project and gave contractors secure access. Contractors used the spreadsheet to enter circuit numbers and location, contact information and other critical details in real-time. "Google Apps saved two months of work for a Class A engineer, or $60,000," Merelo estimates, concluding that it also improved the accuracy of the data, because it was input directly by the on-premise contractors.

Engineers have had similar success using spreadsheets for new plant construction, entering their own data regarding electricity, networks, phones, gas, and water connections in real time. Such collaboration is speeding projects and helping to track costs and delivery benchmarks. "There's one link to one document – not a bunch of versions being emailed around," Merelo notes. Because everyone can see the same organic document and contribute to it simultaneously, meetings are far more engaging and efficient.

On the email front, users are very happy with Google Apps. Individual mailbox size has grown from the 100 megabytes supported by the previous Microsoft system to 25 gigabytes per-user in Gmail. Another improvement and cost saving was the elimination of massive email backups. Pratt employees also enjoy the reliability offered by Google Docs: Now, if they lose a document or make a mistake, they can quickly roll back to a previous version.

Users are discovering unique applications for these tools. For example, the sales team used to struggle to get a "clean" subscriber list for the company's quarterly newsletter. With Google Apps, they've been able to collect customer data in a spreadsheet and easily run a script that validates the email addresses. That scrubbed list is then handed over to the newsletter distributor with little to no bounce-backs. "Before Google, we'd have to put the sales team's request for email validation to the back of the line behind other more pressing projects. Now it's a simple process that gets great results," Merelo says.

All in all, Merelo says the Google Apps experience has been remarkable for Pratt, and he looks forward to using the tools in even more innovative ways.