



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

REAL ESTATE FIRM SECURELY CONNECTS REMOTE OFFICES, GIVING AGENTS ACCESS TO BUSINESS APPLICATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CUSTOMER NAME

Watt Commercial Properties

INDUSTRY

Commercial Real Estate

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

- Connect 15 remote offices to provide access to important business applications
- Cost-effectively support company growth and acquisitions
- Install a highly secure network that accommodates new IP-based applications that help improve productivity

NETWORK SOLUTION

- Cisco Systems routing and switching solutions
- Cisco network security solutions
- Cisco Network Assistant to simplify network management

BUSINESS VALUE

- Improves productivity through secure access to core business applications from 16 locations
- Enables rapid, consistent service to new office locations
- Decreases operations costs with a small staff able to easily monitor and secure the network

As Watt Commercial Properties grows, so does its need to use information for a competitive advantage. With a new network from Cisco Systems®, the real estate company now securely connects all of its locations and enables employees anywhere in the network to access the same set of powerful applications.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

As a successful commercial real estate firm headquartered in Santa Monica, California, Watt Commercial Properties knows a lot about developing sound architecture—whether it’s a building, leasing contract, or an investment opportunity. The firm has provided commercial development, leasing, property management, acquisition, and real estate investment services since its founding in 1962.

In addition to its main office in Santa Monica, Watt has 15 locations across the United States and is pursuing a “growth-by-acquisition” strategy to expand its presence on the East Coast. Unfortunately, until recently, its data networking capabilities weren’t keeping pace.

Only a few of the company’s PCs were connected and able to access several business-critical financial applications. None of the 15 remote offices was connected to the central office through the network, and only a few employees had dial-up e-mail accounts through a local ISP. Paper copies of critical documents were often express-shipped between locations, and as a result, multiple copies of property files existed at both headquarters and local sites, making it difficult to determine which file was the most current. To ensure they were working with consistent, up-to-date information, agents often spent inordinate amounts of time searching for current files and coordinating with headquarters.

As each location also managed its own computers, the company’s IT infrastructure grew into a complicated, inefficient assortment of desktops, laptops, printers, and telephones, with different configurations at each office. When agents encountered technical difficulties, their focus was diverted to fixing problems rather than proactively managing their business. As a result, local offices expended a great deal of time just to keep their technology working. Complicating the matter further was the fact that the company’s remote offices also moved frequently. When a construction project was completed, the local office was no longer needed, and staff and equipment would be redeployed to a new project site. Finally, the existing system had not kept pace with the company’s rapid growth; in three years, its staff expanded from 20 to 200 employees.

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“We needed a lot of flexibility,” he explains. “I have a small staff, so our new network had to be extremely easy to deploy and manage. This isn’t easy when the network must be able to grow as our company grows. At the same time, the network must be able to shrink and have its assets redeployed.”

Budget was also a factor, and the Watt management team wanted to be sure its network investment would deliver a solid financial return.

“I had recently arrived at Watt, and although I had a good idea of what we needed to do, I was also in the middle of building an IT staff,” Campbell explains. He turned to Praxis Computing, a Cisco® Premier Partner, for help. “Praxis was already up to speed, so it helped us quickly make several initial changes that delivered high, short-term value.” The Cisco Premier designation is awarded to independent computer consulting firms that have demonstrated a commitment to technical excellence and continuing education. Membership in the Premier program provides Praxis Computing with the resources to excel at implementing and supporting Cisco Systems network solutions.

“Dan and I agreed about the essential requirements for a new network,” Jeff Roback, vice president of engineering for Praxis, says. “We believe very strongly in the value of an end-to-end Cisco solution and Dan had experience with Cisco networks in the past, so he was very open to that.”

“The single greatest advantage of the network is having all of our employees and locations on the same network with access to the same information. It helps us present an efficient, unified presence and consistent message to our tenants as well as our partners.”

—Daniel Campbell, Chief Information Officer

NETWORK SOLUTION

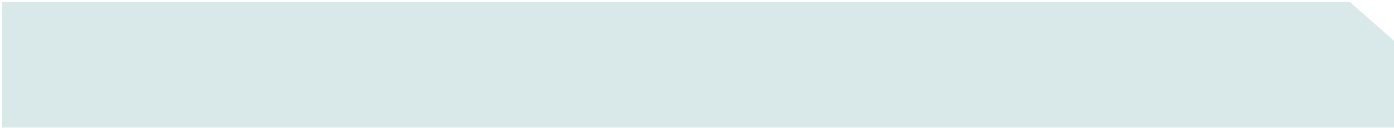
During the first deployment phase, Watt installed Cisco 831 Ethernet broadband routers at its 15 branch locations. The Cisco 831 routers extend embedded network security features to small offices and teleworkers, as well as provide high manageability, scalability, and reliability to keep operational costs low. The Cisco 831 has an Ethernet WAN port for use with an external DSL or cable modem, which makes it an ideal platform for helping Watt’s branch offices easily obtain secure broadband Internet access services from a local ISP in each of their locations.

The Cisco 831 routers connected over a virtual private network (VPN) through a Cisco VPN 3005 Concentrator. The Cisco VPN 3005 Concentrator is a VPN platform designed for small and medium-sized businesses that require up to full-duplex T1/E1 (4 Mbps maximum performance). The platform also supports up to 200 simultaneous IP Security (IPSec) sessions or 50 simultaneous clientless sessions. Encryption processing is performed in software.

“The Cisco 831 routers work well for Watt because they are cost-effective,” Roback says. “In addition to having built-in firewall and VPN capabilities, they can be centrally configured and then shipped to each office for installation by a Watt technician. This enables Campbell to quickly and easily bring new locations online.”

With the WAN in place, Campbell and Roback turned their attention to the corporate LAN. They chose Cisco Catalyst® 3750 Series switches to provide Gigabit Ethernet links to the corporate servers. The Cisco Catalyst 3750 Series switches feature Cisco StackWise™ technology, providing scalability and high resiliency in a compact footprint. With Cisco StackWise technology, customers can connect up to nine Cisco Catalyst 3750 Series switches and manage them as a single, 32-Gbps switching unit.

Watt also uses the Cisco Network Assistant, a centralized, PC-based network management application that simplifies management of the Cisco Catalyst 3750 Series switches, as well as other Cisco switches, routers, and WLAN access points. Through a user-friendly graphical user interface, Campbell’s staff can easily configure, monitor, update, and manage a wide array of switch functions.



Today the network converges 15 branch locations with Watt headquarters into a centralized network. Praxis and Watt are in the process of implementing Cisco Catalyst 2950 Series switches in an access layer to replace older switches and gain a significant performance boost. The Cisco Catalyst 2950 Series switches provides wire-speed Fast Ethernet and Gigabit Ethernet connectivity with a range of software features and configurations that allow Watt to select the right functionality combination for its network edge. The Catalyst 2950 Series switches can also be managed by the Cisco Network Assistant, which helps to create a highly manageable network across Watt's enterprise infrastructure.

BUSINESS VALUE

"The single greatest advantage of the network is that it enables us to have all of our employees and locations on the same network with access to the same information," Campbell says. "Now we can electronically move information in the organization and maintain consistency in the integrity of that information. It helps us present an efficient, unified presence and consistent message to our tenants as well as our partners."

The Watt staff has embraced the network and its capabilities. Overall usage is up and employees can now easily access a wealth of powerful applications, including MRI, a real estate software solution that provides general ledger, accounts payable, accounts receivable, and customer management capabilities. Leases are scanned and stored as PDF files in the application, enabling agents to search by client name and access images of the leases from anywhere on the network. As a result, all Watts' employees now work from the same, consistent information, helping them save time and present an efficient image to the company's clients.

Watt's development group uses a client/server-based project management package to manage project schedules, costs, and budgets. This application can also be accessed remotely, enabling development teams to stay on top of projects anywhere they are located. When combined with e-mail and file-sharing applications, Watt employees now have a powerful suite of productivity tools through the new Cisco network. A new company intranet is also being planned.

The new Cisco network is facilitating Watt's growth as well. Deploying a new location is much easier now because Campbell has defined a replicable deployment structure—including a router, desktop, laptop, printer, and eventually, a telephone—that can be deployed quickly and easily. After the specific ISP connection settings are configured, a new office can be up and running in less than a day.

Network security also plays a prominent role in the new networking strategy. A Cisco PIX[®] 506 Security Appliance provides a firewall between the corporate LAN and the Internet. Watt is also piloting the Cisco Security Agent, which will alert Campbell's staff to unauthorized changes, filter Internet traffic, and provide intrusion detection monitoring.

"Because the Cisco Security Agent is not signature-based, like antivirus programs are, it protects the network before signature updates are released," Roback explains. "So whether or not your location has gotten its antivirus update, the network is still protected and you are not reliant on end users to manage the devices. It's a really powerful product."

Campbell says that as a relatively small company, Watt can't afford to have an engineer on staff to manage routers, assure network security, and monitor policy compliance. "The Cisco Network Assistant and Cisco Security Agent save us troubleshooting time, allow us to effectively manage the network, and help us save money for allocating toward strategic projects," he says. "We don't have to bring Praxis in to do low-level troubleshooting, because my staff can use the Cisco interactive interface to monitor devices, traffic, and bandwidth. It's not only cost-effective, it allows us to be more self-reliant."

NEXT STEPS

With a solid network infrastructure established, Campbell can now begin expanding the firm's document imaging capabilities, add new modules of their core software packages, and begin evaluating IP Telephony solutions.

"Now technology is being viewed within the organization as a tool and a potential competitive advantage," he says. "We'll be able to grow without having to wholesale replace the network—it's just the network we needed."



FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Cisco routing solutions, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/routing>.

To learn more about Cisco switching solutions, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/switching>.

To learn more about Cisco security solutions, go to: <http://www.cisco.com/go/security>.

To learn more about Watt Commercial Properties, go to: <http://www.wattcommercial.com>.

To learn more about Praxis Computing, go to: <http://www.praxis.com>.

This customer story is based on information provided by Watt Commercial Properties and describes how that particular organization benefits from the deployment of Cisco products. Many factors may have contributed to the results and benefits described; Cisco does not guarantee comparable results elsewhere.

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