



Microsoft Online Services Customer Solution Case Study



Online Collaboration Services Support Consulting Company's Quantum Growth

Overview

Country or Region: Global
Industry: Consulting Services

Customer Profile

Experiencing dynamic growth reflecting the growth surge in Alaska, Anchorage-based Staser Consulting Group provides business information solutions for companies of all sizes and projects of all complexity.

Business Situation

SCG needed communication and collaboration software to bring together its highly dispersed workforce, but did not have the financial or physical resources to support onsite infrastructure.

Solution

The Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services provides enterprise-class communication and collaboration capabilities without requiring an investment in on-premise infrastructure.

Benefits

- Increases efficiency and productivity
- Provides enterprise software for fraction of the cost of an on-premise solution
- Slashes travel costs by 70 percent
- Keeps SCG on the leading edge of technology
- Scales to meet the company's dynamic growth

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Jeff Staser, Principal, Staser Consulting Group

Based in Anchorage, Alaska, the Staser Consulting Group (SCG) brings together an interdisciplinary team of experienced business intelligence professionals to help companies make better fact-based decisions. To handle a recent four-fold growth, SCG needed enterprise-class communication and collaboration software, but deploying an on-premise solution was not economically feasible, nor was it practical considering SCG's virtual business model. As a knowledge-based company, SCG found the right solution when Arctic Information Technology—a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner—introduced the Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft® Online Services, which provides enterprise-class communication and collaboration capabilities in an online, subscription-based service. This solution enables SCG's highly dispersed team to work together effectively and have access to the latest documents and contact information.

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Situation

Based in Anchorage, Alaska, Staser Consulting Group (SCG) provides proprietary information quality (IQ) analytical tools, customized business intelligence (BI) support systems, and lifecycle data management and compliance consulting services to help its clients integrate diverse information feeds, operate more efficiently, and compete more effectively in their markets. Its client companies range from small mom-and-pop shops to companies responsible for the Kodiak seaport and the Alaska Natural Gas Pipeline, the largest construction project in the history of North America.

SCG has a core of eight consultants plus more than 42 geographically dispersed associates. Its consultants are always in the field—in fact, SCG has no formal corporate offices. And while this focus on remaining close to its clients works well for the clients, it poses challenges for SCG.

“One of our main challenges is enabling the group of experts that we have brought together to collaborate and communicate as a team,” explains Jeff Staser, SCG Founder and Principal. “We are a virtual company in the true sense—but we have the need to communicate and collaborate like any other enterprise.”

In the past, such communication and collaboration was more ad hoc than enterprise-class. SCG consultants would meet at a local coffee shop in Anchorage, exchange jump drives, and download updated files and contact information using the coffee shop’s Wi-Fi connection. “It was a nightmare,” says Jennifer Boyd, SCG Administrative Manager.

That nightmare got worse during 2007 when SCG grew at a four-fold rate. Staser believes that SCG could have grown even faster, given demand, but the team’s productivity and effectiveness were hampered by the absence

of enterprise-level communication and collaboration technology.

To overcome this challenge, SCG contacted Anchorage-based Arctic IT, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, to explore communication and collaboration solutions. “We knew we wanted to go with a Microsoft solution, but we couldn’t justify the upfront expense and the costs associated with an onsite deployment,” says Boyd. “Without a physical infrastructure and with employees working remotely across Alaska and the lower-48 states, an on-premise deployment simply wouldn’t work. Where would we keep the server—someone’s garage? Who keeps the backup tapes? If someone is on vacation and the server goes down, how would we get into their house to get it back up?”

Complicating all this was the fact that the Alaska telecommunications infrastructure was not yet ready to support a broadly dispersed IT environment of the kind that SCG needed. Yet two key changes made a world of difference for SCG and its ability to communicate and collaborate. In 2007, Alaska upgraded its telecommunications infrastructure with redundant fiber optic cables. Then, Arctic IT proposed the Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services. This was the solution SCG had been waiting for, and it jumped at the chance.

Solution

The Business Productivity Online Suite from Microsoft Online Services is a subscription-based suite of hosted communication and collaboration software that includes Microsoft Exchange Online, Office Live Meeting, Microsoft Office Communications Online, and Microsoft SharePoint® Online. Microsoft hosts and manages the servers that support these offerings, while a partner such as Arctic IT provides local support and value-added services. Because Microsoft maintains the

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servers—and is bound by financially-backed service level agreements (SLAs) to ensure such as SCG do not have to invest in the hardware or onsite support resources required to run such a solution. Instead, they gain access to the full range of services for a low per-month per-user subscription fee.”

“To keep pace with the explosive development that’s going on here in Alaska—and specifically with the natural gas pipeline and Kodiak spaceport projects—we need tools that enable us to meet the demands of the job. Microsoft Online Services is such a tool,” says Staser.

Supporting complex information challenges

SCG is part of a team supporting the building of the Alaska natural gas pipeline. SCG is helping to integrate information from various sources so it can be used to support the needs of a variety of user groups, such as regulatory, environmental, and engineering. SCG puts that data into modelers that perform ‘what-if’ scenarios to determine the most cost-effective way to develop the pipeline. “It’s probably one of the world’s most complex information management challenges,” comments Staser.

“Our consultants are located from the North Slope of Alaska to Atlanta, Georgia, and work across five time zones on a daily basis,” says Staser. “It’s imperative that they be connected and communicating, and Microsoft Online Services enables them to do this in a way we never could before.”

Today, SCG uses Exchange Online for e-mail and calendaring, SharePoint Online for document management and collaboration, and Microsoft Office Live Meeting for remote conferencing and collaboration. “SharePoint Online gives us access to the most current information with just a few clicks,” says Boyd.

“Regardless of where we are working, we all have consistent, up-to-date, reliable information at all times—which is critical for us.”

“With Microsoft Online Services, we gain all the advantages afforded by these powerful collaboration tools, with virtually none of the overhead,” adds Staser.

SCG was also impressed by the speed at which Arctic IT was able to facilitate deployment of the new online solution. “Migration was a snap,” said Boyd. “The integration took less than a day and we were up and running with no glitches. It was all seamless and painless—I can’t say enough about what a great job Arctic IT did. If we have any questions, all the answers are just a phone call away.”

Benefits

Microsoft Online Services enables SCG to take advantage of an enterprise-class messaging and collaboration solution, without requiring it to divert resources from its core business to support that solution. This translates into a number of key benefits for the company.

Increases Efficiency and Productivity

According to Staser, the major benefits of SharePoint Online mirror the three components that can be measured on any project: cost, scope, and schedule.

Staser is so impressed with the collaboration capabilities of SharePoint Online that he wants to recommend it to his clients for such tasks as change order approvals. “It took one of our clients as long as 120 days to get a change order approved. By streamlining the mechanical process, we were able to drop the time to 20 days. But with SharePoint, we can take that same process and drop it down to 1 day.”

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From an administrative standpoint, the shared calendars available through Exchange Online have also had a major impact. Boyd explains, “Before, I’d have to schedule a meeting blind, contact each individual to check their availability, and go back and forth to nail down a time that ultimately worked for everyone. Now I can simultaneously compare calendars to set up a meeting, which reduces my administrative time by at least 50 percent.”

Provides Enterprise Software at a Fraction of the Cost of an On-Premise Solution

Staser discusses the cost differential of an on-premise solution versus the new online services. “The first solution that Arctic IT proposed was a client-server based solution that really didn’t meet our needs,” says Staser. “When they came back with Microsoft Online Services, it was a home run for us.” The original solution came with a price tag of about \$13,000 to \$15,000, whereas subscribing to Microsoft Online Services simply involves a low per month, per person fee. “As a businessman I have to control capital costs and my operating budget. Microsoft Online Services is a fraction of the cost and a quantum leap forward in capability. We also have a huge advantage because we haven’t inherited a legacy infrastructure that holds us back. Most companies have to wait before they can amortize their investment. We’re taking advantage of a cost efficiency from the start.”

Slashes Travel Costs by 70 Percent

According to Boyd, Microsoft Live Meeting will provide significant savings—both for SCG and for its clients. “Not being burdened with high travel costs makes a huge positive impact to the bottom line of our company. Once the pipeline project is fully underway, anywhere from 8 to 42 of us may need to hold weekly meetings. I estimate that Live Meeting Online will result in a 70 percent savings in our annual travel budget.”

Keeps SCG on the Leading Edge of Technology

As a consulting company, it’s important for SCG to have the most innovative communication and collaboration tools available. “In the future, given that Arctic IT is a Gold Certified Microsoft Partner, we know that they are going to keep us abreast of the latest tools that Microsoft has,” says Boyd. “In order to win new business and effectively serve our clients, it is imperative for us to be at the forefront of technology.”

Scales to Meet the Company’s Dynamic Growth

For SCG, another major advantage of Microsoft Online Services and the Business Productivity Online Suite is its scalability. Any solution that SCG chooses needs to be flexible enough to keep pace with the dynamic changes within the company. “If we grow, our IT solution has to grow,” states Staser. “Or if there’s a business cycle that requires us to pull back a little bit, our systems have to respond appropriately. IT has to be perfectly scalable in both directions. We don’t want to charge any more than necessary or carry an excessive infrastructure. This makes our services more competitive.”

“Microsoft Online Services can scale with us on a month-to-month basis,” adds Boyd. “If we need to support 150 people, we can get 150 people up and running in a matter of days.”

“Microsoft Online Services will enable us to compete and grow our business exponentially,” adds Staser. “We grew four-fold last year, and we’re looking at doubling that growth within the next six months.”

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Arctic Information Technology, Inc products and services, call (907) 261-9500 or visit its Web site at: www.arcticit.com

Microsoft Online Services

Microsoft Online Services is a business-class communications and collaboration software offering delivered as a subscription service, hosted by Microsoft, and sold with partners. These services help make it easier for customers to rapidly and cost-effectively access the most up-to-date technologies, and are designed for rapid deployment to provide customers with streamlined communications, simplified management, and business-class reliability and security.

For IT staff, Microsoft Online Services helps reduce the burden of performing routine IT management tasks such as installation, provisioning, ongoing maintenance, patches, updates, and upgrades, making it possible for them to spend more time on initiatives that move the business forward. These services are backed by strong SLAs and are designed to meet the regulatory compliance and reliability needs of enterprise customers. On a technical level, the services boast the sophistication and reliability that customers expect from Microsoft, which continues to invest heavily in building data centers to support these services.

For more information, visit: www.microsoft.com/online

Software and Services

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- Microsoft Exchange Online
- Microsoft SharePoint Online