

Environmental Consultancy Firm finds remote working a breeze with OBT Cloud Services

Niche Environment and Heritage is a specialist environmental and cultural heritage consultancy firm. The company employs 30 expert staff ranging from ecologists and botanists to archaeologists. Together, they offer clients services such as environmental and biodiversity assessments, archaeology and heritage management, GIS and remote sensing services, aquatic ecology, exploration and mining services, wildlife schools, and legal and legislative support.

Client engagements can occur anywhere within New South Wales, or interstate. This widespread field of activity has allowed a certain freedom in the way Niche operates, removing the need to maintain a costly, centralised office. It has provided employees with the flexibility to work from home, and is a dispersed operational model that has worked well since the company's inception more than four years ago.

Dr Ross Jenkins, Senior GIS Officer and IT Services Manager at Niche explains, "Geographically, it makes no sense for us to have an office that everyone has to report to on a daily basis. We do, however, maintain an office in Parramatta for occasional meetings and as an equipment store."

"If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys"

At start-up, Niche's information systems were managed by a small IT services provider on the NSW south coast. Employees would log on to the system where a Citrix environment facilitated the sharing of information and ensured a single, consistent portal for all.

"It was quite successful and ensured truth in data," Dr Jenkins says, "but as we grew, the provider realised they didn't have the scalability to grow with Niche. They also recognised that their data backup and disaster recovery potential weren't sufficient to provide the quality of service we required. At this point the company very kindly recommended we talk to OBT instead."

Niche management looked with interest at OBT's services, but initially decided to experiment with another provider. It was a decision that they soon regretted.

"It was a very unhappy experience. It boils down to the fact that if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys," Dr Jenkins admits "The provider would have been perfectly acceptable had we been running a LAN [local area network]. Although they claimed to be highly skilled at delivering remote desktop services, it was obvious from the number of problems that this was more talk than capability. After 12 months of frustration, we knew we needed a more robust provider and moved to OBT."

Customisation and Consistency

Niche opted for OBT's cloud-based "Desktop Anywhere" service, a hosted desktop service that offered access to Windows applications, data storage, licensing, network management and technical support for a fixed monthly fee. Compared to other cloud services, Desktop Anywhere offered Niche a high degree of customisation in its applications. OBT assumed responsibility for keeping Niche's systems up and running, and allowed Niche staff to concentrate on their particular areas of expertise and productive client work.

For the majority of consultants, the most important hosted applications include Microsoft Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint and occasionally, Access. Accounting staff rely on MYOB, and there are other specialised applications such as the ESRI GIS [geographical information system] system used by the GIS Team.

"For all intents and purposes, 99 per cent of the work we do happens through the Desktop Anywhere interface through to the server farm that OBT maintains. This continues to ensure that the data comes from a single source, and avoids issues with people working on different versions of documents. It eliminates inconsistency through poor versioning, and results in less overheads in hardware because we don't have to provide high-end computers." Dr Jenkins says.

Keeping close with colleagues

As OBT worked closely with Niche, it noticed the importance of reliable and easy communication between Niche teams and colleagues. This led to OBT recommending and implementing a hosted unified communications and collaboration solution, based on the Microsoft Lync platform. The software is being used by Niche staff to identify availability of colleagues, conduct audio and video conferences, share information and collaborate in real time.

Dr Jenkins explains, "As a dispersed office, we have a frequent need to teleconference in one form or another. Before OBT we had been using dial-up teleconferencing but there are a lot of advantages in Lync that go well beyond the dial-up service. Lync is like Skype for grown-ups. We use it for video conferencing to some degree, but mostly we rely on Lync for voice communications." Integration with Outlook calendars and the use of presence are saving Niche consultants time by allowing them to quickly identify whether a colleague is at their desk, has been at their desk in the last few minutes, is in conference or on another call.

"Presence provides a sense of what other people are doing. I use the analogy that it is equivalent to being able to stick your head up over the cubicle to see if someone is there," Dr Jenkins smiles. "It is a way of checking whether they are interruptible. It saves on wasted calls, email traffic and time.

Lync is also helping to solve one of the big challenges of working in a dispersed office – sharing content with colleagues. "Potentially, two people at different locations can open a document, discuss its contents and edit it in real time. It's a much richer experience that allows for another level of collaboration. We're still in our very early days of using Lync, but it seems as though it will be a really useful tool for the way we do business," Dr Jenkins says.

A competitive advantage

Dr Jenkins is certain that Niche's dispersed operational model is a competitive advantage. The avoidance of any major real estate expense keeps costs down and the flexibility to work from home is very attractive to potential employees. However, the huge distances between colleagues means that Niche must work harder to foster company spirit and keep everyone working closely together.

"And this is where Desktop Anywhere and Hosted Lync fit," Dr Jenkins says. They are invaluable for a company like ours where staff are in the field for up to 50% or more of their time – being able to access files and communicate with colleagues from anywhere in Australia or the world is extremely important.

OBT's recommendation of Lync has ushered in a new phase in the relationship between the cloud services provider and Niche. Dr Jenkins appreciated the advice and knowledge that OBT offered on that occasion, and is hoping to engage at a similarly proactive level in the future.

"OBT delivers us a stable service with almost zero downtime. It's a good relationship. In the future, we would like to build our knowledge partnership with them, so they become an additional advisor to our business. With Lync, they came to us having identified a gap in our business and suggested a technological solution. We want to continue that sort of partnership with them, where they provide the technology advice and expertise that supports our growth. As IT Services Manager, I maintain a watching brief, but they have a pool of people who spend all day thinking about the changing technological climate. They can provide the hard core information," he concludes.