«Our network and all the business-critical applications have to be up and running around the globe, 24x7. That's our goal.»

Garth Gray, Vice President Global IT Infrastructure and Michael Heuser, Senior IT Director of gategroup talk about the transformation of their MPLS network into a global SD-WAN with strong integration of the Microsoft Azure Cloud. The talk took place at the American headquarters of gategroup in Reston, Virginia.

gategroup operates in a very demanding setting, namely the airline business. Please tell us a bit about the company.
Garth Gray: gategroup is the leading independent global provider of products, services and solutions to airline passengers. We work directly with airlines – and with their unique passengers in mind – to manage complex, high-volume operations around the world. We have 165 facilities within 126 locations in 33 countries on six continents. Our operation consists primarily of airline catering facilities, running 24x7.

That sounds like a big operation…
Michael Heuser: For a typical long-haul international flight, we provision up to 200,000 items, ranging from food and equipment to passenger amenities. The Emirates A380 aircraft for example, when fully loaded to carry 489 passengers, can also carry up to 1,225 meals at a time. To serve all this food and related beverage and snack service, we'll board 9 tons of catering equipment per flight. That's the weight of 80 baby elephants!

IT must play an important role when it comes to such time-critical, complex processes…
Gray: Absolutely. Our operation really depends on always being able to access the stock and order systems, as well as the latest airline information. Our priority is on-time performance, and that means network integrity is an equal priority.

What would happen if a kitchen lost access to the network?
Gray: Our network and all the business-critical applications like SAP and various internet-based services have to be up and running and available, around the globe, 24x7. That's our goal. We want to avoid any network outage or line going down, to make sure that we don't miss any deadlines and thereby risk of making someone late around the world.

You have completely modernized your network. Can you tell us what triggered that decision?
Gray: We were at a crossroads, where we knew we had to increase our

bandwidth and flexibility as well as leverage quality of service and WAN performance to run our global operations more smoothly. In short, we wanted updated technology and quality service alongside. But it was not only a matter of modernizing our network structure. The vision also included a consolidation of our data centers on- and off-premises, as well as to build the ability to heavily leverage Microsoft Azure Cloud for data center as well as software as a service.

And what was the result of your evaluation?
Gray: We found resistance to our approach from traditional MPLS providers. We wanted a multi-provider approach – with high speed, low cost business-grade internet service with local breakouts. For some reason it's a paradigm shift for many providers who said «We need it all or we can't work with you». Simultaneously, we started to investigate Open Systems. Their approach seemed to be very interesting and promised to deliver on most of our expectations. After checking the details and speaking to some reference clients, we decided to do a test and get some quantified data. And that's exactly what we did. We put our trust in the numbers.

Exactly how did you go about it?
Heuser: After some internal research, we found out that we can get high-speed business grade internet in all our regions, including somewhat tricky locations. So the first real investigation was, how feasible it is to source this on our own? We went to the most remote regions of our landscape and tested if we could find ISP connectivity and how it would perform against our existing setup.

And what did you find out?
Heuser: Our tests confirmed that at most locations, the performance of business-grade internet was on par with, if not slightly better than, MPLS. Where it was weaker, the difference was imperceptible, so it was still in the same range of acceptable quality.

Gray: With the migration to Open Systems and business-grade internet, we projected we could save money while at the same time achieving an increase in bandwidth that would be 10 times better than before with far more flexibility to upgrade and to more quickly connect new locations.

And what happened then? You had an ambitious schedule…
Gray: After we did the analysis, we proceeded with a pilot program, which – once we saw the improvements in Asia – ended up being 32 sites in Asia, North America and Europe. With that success and with our proven ability to source ISPs and get these things rolled out, we moved forward with the larger rollout in 2015. In 2015 we implemented all 100+ locations and also migrated our data center, as well as moving applications to Microsoft Azure.

Specifically which concept was implemented? And which points were especially important for it?
Heuser: Our network is now based completely on internet technology with a multi-provider approach. Secure local internet access is very important to us at all locations. It makes it possible for us to get high-performance connections to the internet and into the Azure cloud. With the new setup, we also enhanced security at the site level.

What about flexibility?
Gray: Flexibility has gone up dramatically. We focus on short contracts with the ISP providers whenever we can, so we have the flexibility to change bandwidth or even the provider according to our needs. Additionally, the connection of new locations, which previously could take months and which used to be associated with a lot of effort, is now possible in a very short time.

Did you get any feedback from the business?
Gray: Yes, it was very positive. Our goal was to

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«We focus on the applications and when and where data is routed through our network. Our goal is to enhance visibility, so that we are able to control, prioritize and accelerate our business-critical applications in our data center and in the Azure cloud.»

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introduce better tools for the business. Immediately following the rollout, we were able to introduce much more robust elements of everyday tools to enhance the workplace experience. With the network improvements, for example, any gategroup team member can now run video conferences from their desktops globally. In a world of continuous improvement like ours, we will always be doing fine-tuning and seeking ways to make the services even better.

So you need to further analyze, what exactly is happening on the network...
Gray: Exactly, and that's what we focus on now: on the applications and when and where data is routed through our network. Our goal is to enhance visibility, so that we are able to control, prioritize and accelerate our business-critical applications in our data center and in the Azure cloud.

That's where Application Performance Management comes in...
Gray: Yes. We need the transparency to know what's happening on the network and to control and prioritize our business-critical applications. That is a very important step for us in terms of delivering quality service to our business.

In the past 18 months, you have highly centralized IT, but the actual work is still being done in the regions. How does that work in day-to-day life?
Gray: It works fine. I think it is important to empower the whole IT organization to support the business where it happens. Today, all teams execute against a centralized strategy.

Heuser: Our setup allows us to do exactly that. One central element in this is the fact that we do our entire change control through Mission Control Portal, which is linked to our change control process within our organization. That gives us greater visibility from an operational point of view. And we also include our security team and our architecture team, so they can look at it and make sure that it is aligned with our guidelines and strategy.

In the case of an incident, Mission Control Portal enables us to quickly get to the root of the problem and directly address the issue. It ensures that all of us have access to the same data and can look at the same information. That's definitely a critical advantage for a globally operating team.

Gray: I'm a fan of Mission Control Portal. Yeah, I love it. As a manager it makes my life so much easier. If someone calls me about a connectivity problem on the other side of the globe, I can pop in and much more easily determine and address the issue.

You move a lot of business-critical applications to Microsoft Azure. Can you give us some of your thoughts on that?
Gray: Our access to six Azure clouds connected around the world means an infrastructure whereby users can easily and quickly deploy the needed application wherever they are located.

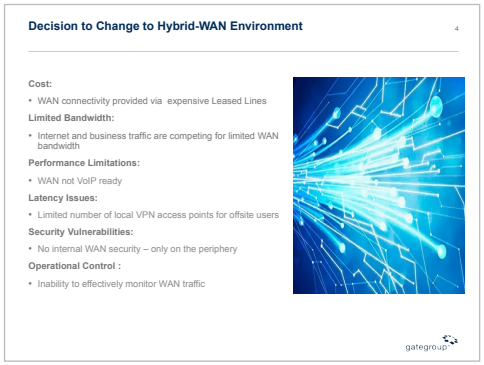
Do you think that the new setup helps your organization to better enable the business?
Heuser: Absolutely, and it already has. Today, we can focus more on the service management perspective. The team is knowledgeable enough to manage the environment. And we are able to reach out to the business and offer them more timely and enhanced solutions to their needs.

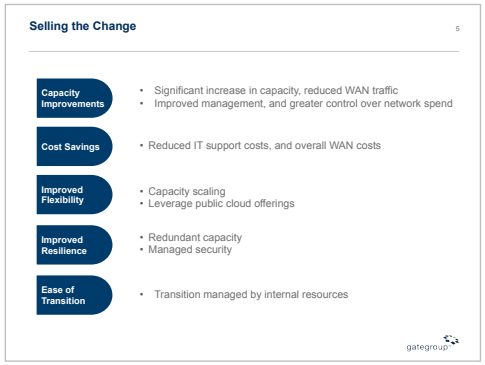
Gray: We have a solid and reliable infrastructure, with increased bandwidth and centralized monitoring, management and security. All this combined allows us to have more time available to have a much more mature dialogue with the business.

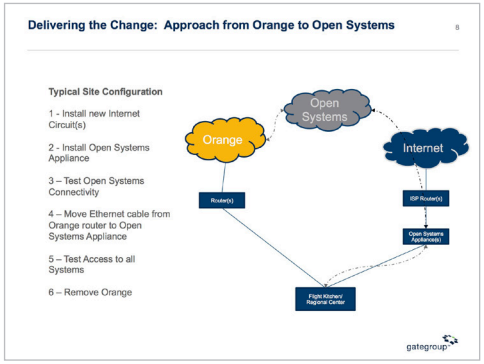
How is the working relationship with Open Systems going?
Gray: It's a real partnership, based on trust. We had a very good feeling from the beginning, and the Engineers of Open Systems really delivered on their promises and performed very well.

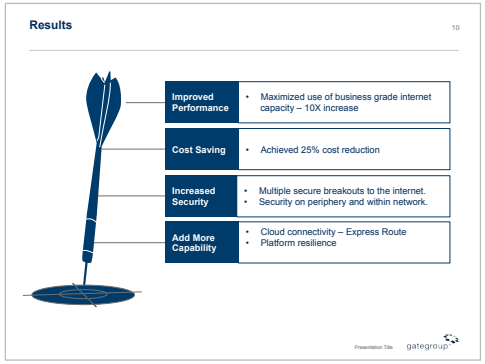
Heuser: When Open Systems announces that something's going to happen, it happens. The consistent execution allows us to put our trust in the team. That's the best kind of partnership you can have with a vendor, where there's routine operational activity with a governance model to measure how the improvements are going forward. I don't have to worry about basic maintenance and operations. Because I know it's going to happen. That's a good feeling.

For more information about gategroup visit www.gategroup.com









Interested in more information?

Please contact us at consulting@open.ch

You can also check out the video and slides of Garth Gray's presentation at the WAN Summit conference in New York: http://www2.telegeography.com/wan-summit-new-york-2016-videos-gategourmet

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