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Case Study: Alltech Plants Seeds for Continued Growth with APX Net Fiber Network

Alltech, a private company based in Lexington, KY, operates 20 companies worldwide with the single goal of delivering smarter, more sustainable solutions for global nourishment. Its core mission is to improve the health and performance of people, animals and plants through nutrition and scientific innovation – and it has been delivering on that promise for four decades. Alltech's nutrition products for animals and humans have quietly made an enormous impact on agriculture practices and production around the world. Alltech's more than 5,000 team members share a vision for a Planet of Plenty™, believing agriculture – led by science and technology -- has the greatest potential to shape the future of our planet.

Challenge

Since its founding by Dr. Pearse Lyons in 1980, Alltech has been extremely fast paced and entrepreneurial, growing rapidly and acquiring several companies to accelerate its mission. The growing number of companies and offices remained largely autonomous in many respects, even making technology decisions locally. Alltech's decentralized approach worked extremely well for years but became less sustainable after the organization scaled to $2 billion with nearly 100 offices doing business in more than 120 countries.

As a result, Alltech transitioned to a centralized support services strategy. A key benefit of this new approach was enabling the organization's management information systems (MIS) operations group to address several challenges with legacy network infrastructure and systems that were hindering the organization's ability to enhance capabilities globally. Alltech tackled these challenges in phases, starting with a project in North America to replace an old, underperforming and expensive MPLS network it inherited from one of its acquisitions.

The company that was acquired, now part of Alltech's North America Feed Division, had 30 manufacturing and warehouse facilities, and most of them were in rural locations that made upgrading the MPLS network a difficult proposition. Meanwhile the network was not able to support the needs of a modern, digital organization.

"Our MPLS connections at those 30 sites were 3Mbps," said Guy Stockwell, Global Director of MIS Operations for Alltech. "We couldn't do anything with them. Also, if we suffered from an event of some kind, and needed to execute a DR (disaster recovery), we wouldn't have been able to recover. We needed to do something."

Objectives

Stockwell and his team had several objectives as part of their initiative to upgrade their WAN network and improve Alltech's global communications environment, including:

- Boost network connections at hard-to-reach rural facilities
- Increase bandwidth to support growing traffic and new tech implementations
- Find one national provider that could deliver what was needed at every location
- Stay within the global MIS department's budget

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Stockwell approached Rob Keelen, President of SinglePoint Solutions, a technology consultancy, to explore potential vendors and solutions, knowing that what he was asking for was in short supply.

"We wanted fiber," said Stockwell. "We didn't want to ride a VPN subject to everybody's interconnects. But options for getting fiber to these rural areas affordably were limited to say the least. After doing some digging, Rob came back to us saying, 'I've got the company for you; it's APX Net. They can deliver in rural and metro locations, and they do it really well.'"

Alltech already had experience, albeit limited, with APX Net. The carrier-neutral provider had deployed a redundant connection to Alltech's hosting provider for replication. "It worked extremely well," said Stockwell. "We had no problems with the circuit, which is unusual in my experience. So, we reached out to them."

Solution
Stockwell, Keelen and the team at APX Net came up with a plan to run fiber to all 30 facilities with Type I Ethernet circuits for maximum performance and reliability.

"Type I circuits are the most rock-solid circuits in the industry," said Jeff Wood, president of sales for APX Net. "They always deliver the most uptime. They have the highest SLAs. They have fewer packet drops and their mean time to repair (MTTR) is higher. They're incredibly stable and high performing."

There were three components to the APX Net WAN solution:

- Fiber through APX Net for the primary dedicated internet connection
- Wireless backup for a secondary, redundant connection
- SD-WAN overlay to manage the connections and quality of service

"It's all private connectivity front-ended by our SD-WAN provider to create a global private network," explained Stockwell. "Each site has a minimum 25Mbps connection that can be quickly bumped up to 50Mbps or 75Mbps as needed to support all kinds of cloud-based technologies and applications."

Twenty eight of the 30 locations were fully implemented in less than 10 months; the last two are under construction and due to be completed soon.

"Getting fiber connectivity in rural locations can be really difficult when you're working with local providers and contractors," said Stockwell. "But APX has done an amazing job. One day after we signed our contract, they were doing site inspections to start the first two fiber builds."

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Results

Alltech now has a robust and reliable fiber-based WAN network capable of supporting several new technology initiatives. Already the company has replaced a dated Lync 2010 phone system with Microsoft Teams, a cloud-based solution that enables employees to quickly call, message, video chat or schedule a meeting with colleagues, customers and partners around the world.

"Deploying Teams would not have been possible with our old MPLS network," said Stockwell. "To implement Teams we needed solid, fast connections. Otherwise we would have suffered poor QoS [quality of service] and dropped calls."

Alltech soon will leverage its new network to deploy barcode technology at remote manufacturing facilities, Stockwell said. This will allow employees to use handheld scanners to barcode various ingredients and products while making feed. That way the data will be automatically entered into the enterprise resource planning (ERP) system on the back end to keep inventory up to date. Packing and shipping labels will be scanned as well to streamline receiving and shipping. Overall, the project will improve accuracy and efficiency, saving time and money.

Alltech's new network also will enable a major revamp to the customer relationship management (CRM) system next year. At present the organization's CRM is used in isolation. But Stockwell's team intends to bond it to a business intelligence platform they're building and tie it all back to their primary data center and ERP systems.

"The door's open now," said Stockwell. "There's nothing that we couldn't deploy with the fiber infrastructure we now have. Whether you're in a location in Minnesota or here at corporate, it doesn't matter. We have a private network with the amount of bandwidth and the scalability that we would need to do virtually anything we want to do."

At the same time Alltech boosted its network bandwidth, quality and speed, it lowered its costs. "We're going to save $175,000 annually on just these 30 sites – and the bulk of those savings will come from APX Net because it's the most substantial part of the deployment," Stockwell said.

In addition to competitive pricing, APX Net uniquely provides Alltech with a flat rate for all locations and a consolidated monthly invoice, enabling easier expense management and accounting.

"The bill APX Net provides is sorted by location and we turn around and bill the locations for their individual services," said Stockwell. "That's not something that every provider is going to do. … So that's been extremely helpful."

Alltech's network transformation has been a long time coming – with the inability to get fiber to its locations as a major stumbling block. With APX Net, Alltech is finally able to move forward. "I couldn't ask for more than APX Net delivered," said Stockwell. "I never experienced that level of action and support in my entire career frankly."