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Managing Transformational Change During the Pandemic

A Case Study of Rainier Connect

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Introduction

Located in the Southern Puget Sound region of Western Washington, Rainier Connect is the area's premier broadband, TV, and telephone service provider for home and business. Rainier Connect began operating more than 100 years ago as Mashell Telephone with 300 subscribers. Today, it serves more than 40,000 subscribers and places a strong focus on providing communications to underserved areas.

2020 has proven to be one of the most consequential years in Rainier Connect's history. Like all service providers, Rainier Connect has had to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. But in addition, the company embarked on some transformational changes that would test its resources, with a real possibility of disaster waiting in the wings. A partnership with ISPN Network Services (ISPN), a Kansas-based technical support and managed services provider, proved crucial in weathering the storm.

Time to Grow

For more than two decades, the city of Tacoma, Washington, owned and maintained the Click! Network through its municipal utility service, Tacoma Public Utilities (TPU). Click! Network was a cable TV and wholesale internet provider that delivered internet service through contracts with three retail internet service providers (ISPs), Rainier Connect, and two others. The financial challenges of maintaining this network was straining the resources of TPU, and in 2015 it decided to take bids for handing off the operations of Click! Network. Rainier Connect won the bid, and so began an extensive process of absorbing the operations and subscribers of Click! Network, a process that involved taking on the subscribers of those two other ISPs and growing its subscriber base by 50% in the process.

These transitions proved to be complicated as existing subscribers from two separate ISPs needed to be transitioned to Rainier Connect, including swapping out CPE, and implementing complex billing conversions. Rainier Connect knew they would need a reliable partner to help manage this complex process. The partner they turned to was ISPN.

Ten years prior, with a subscriber base of roughly 15,000, Rainier Connect had decided to outsource a portion of its technical support and customer service functions to provide improved coverage and efficiency. The decision to outsource was easy, but unfortunately, finding the right partner was not. The first two companies that Rainier Connect partnered with were unable to provide the required level of service. These relationships were short lived and unsuccessful. Realizing that greater due diligence was necessary, Rainier Connect committed to performing substantial research before making a third choice. That research paid off, as the next company they picked to help them with technical support, hosted email and customer service was ISPN. It was a decision that would prove to be critical a decade later.

According to Amanda Singleton, Customer Care Manager for Rainier Connect, "From the very beginning, our relationship with ISPN has been rock solid. It was a very smooth launch, and communication has been consistently clear and successful. Our internal support team now treats ISPN internally as another member of the team. Information shared internally at Rainier Connect, invariably gets shared with them."

ISPN's dynamic flexibility and reliability in providing customer support and email would be put to the test during the Click! Network transition. Both Rainier Connect and ISPN were about to embark on a difficult journey.

A Hint of Disaster

Under normal circumstances, closing on the Click! Network transaction would be challenging enough for a company of Rainier Connect's size. Dramatic increases in call volume were expected, as were complex integration challenges. But there were more challenges to come. Two specific circumstances presented complicated hurdles that were completely unforeseen. The first came when one of the transitioning ISPs attempted to delay or outright stop the deal after the fact, preventing an orderly and managed cut-over. As a result, rather than a well-timed customer transition, Rainier Connect was faced with transitioning 9,000 subscribers into a new system at the very last minute.

The second challenge was a once-in-a-generation crisis. The date of the final switchover from Click! Network to Rainier Connect—April 1, 2020, just happened to coincide with, what at the time was the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing a regional lockdown in Rainier Connect's service territory.

Growing a subscriber base by 50%, combined with the questions and challenges that come with any acquisition or hand-off of operations is already a daunting project. Add doing it in a region that's been classified as one of the pandemic hotspots, and with a staff that is attempting to transition to a new work from home status. It has disaster written all over it.

Furthermore, as a signee of the FCC Keep Americans Connected pledge, Rainier agreed to keep services connected for customers who were facing financial hardship during the pandemic, which resulted in a significant loss of operating revenue. There was also a notable increase in the need for strong technical support and reliable email with more subscribers working from home and relying on their home internet connection.

ISPN's long standing support and understanding of Rainier Connect proved to be critical during this unique time. The two partners could collaborate to map out and execute a plan to absorb these two new ISPs, while also maintaining Rainer Connect's level of service with existing customers during the pandemic. As of August 1, 2020, Rainier Connect had vastly exceeded the number of logged calls it received during the entirety of 2019. In an environment like this you need flexibility, agility, and a willingness to get the job done at any cost.

Partnership that Proves its Worth

These are challenging times that demand resiliency and the reliability of strong partnerships—the kind that come with having an experienced outsourced provider with deep industry knowledge and solid operations.

ISPN has been able to scale its support to fit the needs of Rainier Connect—able to quickly ramp up to 24/7/365 coverage when necessary to meet the demands of the transition and the challenges of the pandemic. Rainier Connect and ISPN were in daily communication, jointly managing this unique situation.

"Throughout the pandemic and its coincidental timeline with our additions, we've had to manage plans that shift daily—particularly with the closing that completed on the day before we took over operations for the Click! Network," says Amanda. "ISPN's flexibility and agility throughout has been crucial to our success. When abrupt changes in service occur, they're able to rapidly create new processes to address them, and they've been able to bring on new staff quickly to adapt to sudden spikes in volume. ISPN has consistently represented us well."

Avoiding Disaster with Business Continuity Planning

Rainier Connect's experience during the pandemic is a case study in resilience and business continuity. It's an example of the need to be prepared and to have the right partners in place in the face of unforeseen circumstances that could severely impact a company's ability to survive.

The workforce and operational impacts brought about by COVID-19 have profoundly affected almost every company and have shown the importance of having a sound and thoughtful continuity planning strategy. Many companies were able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, while others were caught unprepared and have suffered considerable losses, and even business collapse, as a result.

While the recent pandemic has been significant, there are many other situations for which ample preparation is required. For instance, this year's storm season has proven devastating for the Gulf Coast, Iowa, and the Southeast. Natural disasters, such as tornados, wildfires, and earthquakes plague states throughout the rest of the U.S. each year.

Additionally, sudden changes to your business, such as acquisitions and mergers, can have serious workforce and operational impacts. Preparation that protects or allows for the smooth continuation of key areas of your business is essential.

Workforce and operational continuity concerns force you to address the following issues:

The strength, reliability, and capacity of your network
A strong understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of your network is crucial. Will it be able to handle sudden spikes in usage and it is it robust enough to deal with long-term requirements in an ever-changing environment?

The ability to compensate for a disaster that affects your physical structure or network
Are you well-positioned to continue business in the event of a physical disaster? How will you respond if a fire, hurricane, earthquake, or tornado compromises the integrity of your physical space or hardware, such as servers at your headquarters?

Your flexibility to adapt to a rapidly changing workforce situation
How flexible are you with regard to your workforce? Are you able to quickly pivot to a work-from-home situation, as the current pandemic has forced us to do? What if a large portion of your workforce is compromised with an illness?

Sudden increases in subscriber volume, orders, and upgrades in times of stress
How prepared are you to adapt to sudden surges—for instance, an unexpected increase in subscriber volume, or orders, or necessary upgrades in unforeseen times of stress?

Any of these issues can expose fundamental and costly weaknesses in your operations. Perhaps it's time to start thinking about finding a reliable partner who can have your back when your systems are experiencing maximum stress.

Key Lessons from Rainier Connect

While the challenges Rainier Connect faced with the pandemic couldn't have been foreseen, the key piece of advice they have is to trust the experts. "When it came to COVID-19, we paid attention to what we were hearing from the experts in our local government and the scientists—we were careful not to open our lobbies prematurely," says Amanda. "It's kept us from having our customers and staff exposed to illness and from having to backtrack and creating long-term confusion and distrust."

"And when it came to keeping our business on track, we trusted the experts at ISPN. At Rainier Connect, one of our strengths is that we're flexible and nimble. We were lucky to find a partner who is able to match our changes step-for-step. We've found the best lesson is simply to have a strong partner."

This experience has made Rainier Connect stronger and more resilient. Like all broadband providers, Rainier Connect provides essential services—services that always keep the community connected, especially in times of crisis. Rainier Connect could not have averted disaster alone. Luckily, they established a critical partnership with ISPN over a decade ago—a partnership that has made both companies stronger and better prepared to meet the challenges, both anticipated and unexpected, on the road ahead.

ISPN's Capabilities

ISPN offers best-in-class technical support, email hosting and subscriber services to end users along with managed network solutions and engineering services to enhance ISP operations. ISPN's network provisioning and HelpDesk ticketing software seamlessly manages and supports subscribers, providing unparalleled transparency, integration, and resolution.

Network Support and Managed Services
Providing exceptional operational and network support, ISPN offers managed services that ensure your business will not stop running even if your current network does. ISPN provides network and email reliability and uptime where others often fail.

Geographical Redundancy
One of the strongest protections you can have is a reliable backup in a separate location. If a major event or natural disaster affects the integrity of your physical location or network, ISPN can keep your business's network and support running from a remote location. That's security.

Workforce Support
ISPN's call center provides your customers with technical support 7 days a week, 365 days a year. If you don't require 24/7/365 support, ISPN can be there to provide support for the hours you need, such as after hours and weekends. Furthermore, ISPN can quickly scale up when the situation demands flexibility.

Expertise and Consultation
From managed subscriber services to comprehensive network management solutions, the ISPN team are experts at developing innovative solutions for the evolving ISP. And they are happy to share their experience.

Visit ispn.net to learn more about how ISPN can help you manage your network and build redundancy across your operations and support functions.

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