

Cisco Helps **Pearl Law Group** Keep Clients Well Informed

A leader in business immigration law in the United States, Pearl Law Group has raised the client-services bar with its own case-tracking automation software running on a productivity-boosting network featuring Cisco Systems products.

Background

Founded in 1994, Pearl Law Group (PLG) was named one of the fastest growing companies in the United States by Inc. Magazine in 2002. The 32-person firm headquartered in San Francisco uses the latest networking technologies to streamline legal procedures and bring a new level of responsiveness and accountability to the practice of immigration law. PLG handles employment-based immigration cases—including visas and permanent residency permits (“green cards”), corporate compliance, and other immigration matters—for a prestigious client portfolio that includes Applied Materials, Electronic Arts, Lucasfilm, PalmOne, Polycom, and Stanford University.

PLG's proprietary ImmigrationTracker software is a complete immigration case management system that boosts the legal staff's productivity by automating workflow, tracking progress, storing critical data, and balancing case loads. The software's rich reporting capabilities and links to the government keep PLG apprised of how the firm's cases are proceeding every step of the way. And because clients can access ImmigrationTracker themselves to check on casework, it also functions as a powerful customer relationship management application.

In 2001 PLG established ImmigrationTracker as a separate company, and now licenses the software to immigration law firms and human resources departments around the U.S. For PLG, innovative software running on a highly reliable and available network infrastructure is indispensable to conducting its business, growing its client base, and retaining top-notch legal talent. It is this empowering network technology—together with high-quality work provided by a well-trained staff—that has catapulted this relatively small firm to the top of its field in just a few years.

Challenge

The chief business challenge that PLG needed to address was what co-founder and CEO Julie Pearl calls the “sleep-at-night factor,”—that is, the peace of mind that both staff and clients enjoy when deadlines are met, documents are accurate, and there are no informational or procedural mishaps on a case.

Immigration proceedings are generally complex: acquiring a visa can involve the presentation of some 20 documents and up to 40 different steps that must be followed in a specific order. The application process is usually very time sensitive as well, as foreign



nationals can't begin work until they receive their green cards, and PLG's clients' projects may have to be put on hold if there are delays. A single error in a document—even something as trivial as a misspelled name or an incorrect entry on a form—can result in delays to the process that may last days or weeks.

Because monitoring the progress of cases is as important to PLG's clients as it is to its attorneys, an outward facing Web component had to be an integral part of the network. PLG aspires to make monitoring legal cases as easy for clients as tracking express-shipped packages. That means being able to get secured information directly off the Internet 24 hours a day, rather than having to exchange e-mails or telephone calls.

Another business challenge for PLG was to make a good price-to-value network purchase that would enable the firm to cope with rapid growth, while delivering a quick return on investment (ROI). PLG needed flexible, resilient, “right-sized” network solutions that could grow with the company. Employees located across four states required secure connections to all the firm's networked resources and applications, as did the firm's teleworkers, which include CEO Pearl herself.

In view of PLG's commitment to client responsiveness and highly efficient workflow, a paper-based system was never an option. Responding to client demand, Fred Colman, a former biotechnologist and Pearl's husband, helped develop ImmigrationTracker for PLG. Colman is now ImmigrationTracker's president.

“There is a lot of information that needs to be gathered for these visa applications,” explains Colman. “With a paper-based system, a client had to fill out a questionnaire and fax it. And people at the law firm had to type the information on the appropriate forms, transcribe it for the database, and file it by hand. By automating the process, we've saved time and reduced errors without compromising the personal touches.

“ImmigrationTracker lets the applicant go online and supply information using an electronic questionnaire, which is then entered into the database,” Colman continues. “Discrepancies are automatically pointed out for the legal staff when they review the form before filing it. If a visa is expiring, the attorneys are automatically notified and can query the government database.”

In addition, ImmigrationTracker provides a rich administrative dimension with its productivity-management capabilities. The program reports how many cases are pending, how long each case took at each stage, who worked on it, and other valuable information. This network-enabled reporting is vital to a law firm that charges according to the type of work performed, rather than by a flat hourly rate.

Such a value-based billing model is becoming increasingly common in the legal arena. But to make the model work, a firm must be able to economize by turning more work over to paralegals with access to expertise-enhancing software tools, streamlining and automating business processes and legal procedures wherever possible, and offering new services to clients. All this requires a network that can deliver actionable intelligence, while also being able to handle the requisite traffic flows and to grow along with the caseload and client base.

Solution

The intelligent information network by Cisco Systems® provides the advanced communications, application optimization, and unobstructed access to data that enable law firms such as PLG to achieve a highly productive and collaborative workplace. By using the network to create an efficient, streamlined workflow, the firm can deliver the right information to the right people at the right time—transcending the limitations of data accessibility, geography, and business hours.



Coleman says that the decision to deploy Cisco products to support the shared PLG/ImmigrationTracker network was based on “the quality of the Cisco products, the reliability, and the quality of the service Cisco provides. You want a solution you don't have to think about. These are quality tools I can rely on.”

Cisco networks allow legal offices to converge all their voice and data communications on one infrastructure, to cut costs and take advantage of advanced applications and services. Moreover, a Cisco intelligent information network helps streamline business operations by bringing together information from a variety of sources: company and client data repositories, legal libraries, courthouses, and government agencies. And attorneys can access critical information and resources from wherever they happen to be, without compromising data security or client privacy.

PLG currently has a Cisco Catalyst® 2924M XL-EN switch installed on the LAN backbone, creating reliable and secure virtual LANs (VLANs) for PLG and ImmigrationTracker corporate users, as well as for research and development, and testing of the ImmigrationTracker software.

Results

With ImmigrationTracker on their Cisco powered network, PLG has become the fastest growing firm of its kind in California history, reaching US\$5 million in revenue in 2003. “We couldn't do what we do without our network and the Web,” according to Pearl. “With the products that Cisco provides and our software, we've realized a huge business advantage. We attained our ROI in a matter of months. And the technology has very clearly enabled our growth.”

Pearl puts technology at the top of her list when it comes to assessing the value her company provides clients. “We must, must use technology for those things that technology does better,” she says. “I believe it is malpractice to not have a system in place that has capabilities like accuracy checks and reminders. It only takes one error on a form to deny someone their legal status.

“We've had many companies say to us, 'We're hiring you because you're one of the top firms in this field, and we're truly impressed with your technology.' So clients see our investment in technology as a sign of our commitment to customer service.”

The ImmigrationTracker software can cut preparation time of a typical case process from a month to about five days, a compelling competitive advantage. What's more, current ImmigrationTracker customers report that for every eight to nine users, the software saves one full-time paralegal position—which equates to approximately \$50,000 a year in the San Francisco Bay area.

Thanks in part to the reliability of its Cisco network, the firm can now help ensure profitability by monitoring staff performance, fine-tuning task assignments, and balancing cases equitably among the attorneys. The legal staff feels that PLG gives them the best networked tools available to do their jobs. And clients are happier when they realize they won't be billed more to cover inefficiency and wasted effort.

In addition to increasing productivity, client satisfaction, and profits, PLG's connected workplace has resulted in higher morale and a better working environment. For example, because she can access everything she needs over the network, Pearl has been able to telecommute while raising two young children. “It was really important for me to spend time at home in the mornings,” Pearl says. “But I can get on the network and see what's happening on every case, something that was impossible to do five years ago.”

Next Steps

The first order of business for PLG in the future will be replacing existing equipment with new Cisco firewalls and virtual private networking (VPN) equipment for remote access, as the firm's existing technology supplied by another vendor "is not working as well as we would like," says Coleman.

Continued growth is also on the horizon. "We've concluded that we need to average at least 15 to 20 percent growth per year, if for no other reason than to give the superstar talent we hope to attract and retain a way to move up in the organization," says Pearl. "And so I intend to keep growing."

And because PLG's clients often operate in a multitude of countries, PLG is looking at extending its technology so it can handle cases outside the U.S. This will involve a further expansion of its present networking infrastructure. In the meantime, PLG expects sales of ImmigrationTracker to double in 2004, when a new version is released that is compatible with PeopleSoft and Oracle human resources software.

"In my opinion, and in the opinion of the technical people who staff our network, the quality of the products and the quality of the service and support are the reasons to go with Cisco rather than with Brand X," concludes Colman. "All the features, the reliability, and the upgradability makes Cisco the preferred choice." Pearl agrees. "When we combine the very best products that Cisco provides with the software we were able to develop, it's a huge business advantage. The combination helps us recruit and retain top talent. And it makes our lives easier and our work better."

ABSTRACT

Pearl Law Group (PLG) is a modest-sized, but fast-growing corporate immigration law firm that has made a big name for itself by delivering excellent client service. PLG uses case-tracking software and a reliable and scalable Cisco-based network to keep clients in the loop and increase staff productivity and loyalty.



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