

TCE & TalkSwitch Helping to Keep Northern Michigan Roads Passable while Saving Huron County Up to \$14,000 per Year

Huron County, Michigan—more than 100 miles north of Detroit and surrounded on three sides by Lake Huron—is known for heavy snowfalls and ice storms during the winter months. Thick blankets of snow regularly choke the county’s many rural roads, barricading residents in their homes.

It’s during these times that communication becomes a life or death matter for employees of the Huron County Road Commission. When snow prevents an ambulance from getting to a heart attack victim or keeps fire fighters from reaching a blazing home, the Huron County Road Commission immediately dispatches the nearest snow plows to open roads and get rescue teams to their destinations.

But that can only happen if communications systems at the road commission are dependable. When it came time to update phones and communications systems, Huron County Road Commission IT Manager Steve Kanaski turned to TCE Company because TCE Company could deliver what other telephone system providers said was impossible.

When Kanaski came on board, the road commission’s phone technology was seriously out of date and the original system provider had gone out of business. With two service buildings separated from the main office building by up to 400 feet, the commission had seven phone lines running to the main building and two lines to each of the service buildings. And the lines to the service buildings weren’t extension lines—they were trunk lines, meaning that anyone who called the main office but really needed to talk to someone in a service building had to hang up and dial a different number. This often caused callers to feel like they were getting the runaround, Kanaski said.

With a wireless computer network already in place between the three buildings, Kanaski wanted to make the phone system wireless too, and eliminate the trunk lines to the service buildings.

“One vendor told me it wasn’t possible,” Kanaski said.

TCE Company Committed to Achieving the ‘Impossible’

Engineers from TCE Company worked one-on-one with Kanaski to determine his needs. Engineers considered Huron County’s climate, the functions of the road commission, the features Kanaski wanted, his overall system objectives, and the architecture of the road commission’s computer network.

“We had to look at subtle things, such as the communication protocols used by his network and determining which phone system protocols would be compatible, while still meeting the clients’ objectives” TCE Company President Brian Gatza said. “A lot of what he is doing, including the use of a multi-building wireless network to service phones, is pushing the envelope.”

But TCE Company rose to the challenge. After performing a thorough analysis that included some planning sessions with Kanaski and comparing a variety of phone systems and phones, TCE Company engineers recommended the TalkSwitch 484vs hybrid telephone system. The TalkSwitch 484vs is equipped for use with both standard analog telephone lines and Internet-based VoIP SIP lines. Coupled with the TS-600 TalkSwitch business phone, designed especially for use with this hybrid phone system, the TalkSwitch system integrated easily with the existing phone lines and wireless computer network.

TalkSwitch eliminated the need for the four phone lines to the service buildings, which saves the Huron County Road Commission nearly \$200 per month for those lines. At first, other managers at the road commission were concerned that eliminating four phone lines would cause outgoing calls to jam up as too few lines would be available. But so far, Kanaski said, they’ve never come up short because TalkSwitch allows more efficient use of the remaining lines.

Once the TalkSwitch system was installed, TCE Company engineers provided Kanaski with extensive training on programming, maintaining and customizing the system’s software. Using a combination of phone conferencing and remote access of the road commission’s computers over the Internet, TCE Company engineers walked Kanaski step-by-step through customization of the system and gave him hands-on practice in programming and servicing it.

“The overall objective was to have him trained and proficient on the management of the system to minimize the need for outside support and make him self sufficient,” Gatza said.

TCE Expertise Eliminates Worry, Hassle and Unnecessary Expense

Within a few short months, TCE Company’s expertise was put to the test when a storm laid down three inches of snow and a quarter-inch of ice in Huron and nearby counties. The road commission’s new phone system from TCE Company worked without a hitch—getting those snow plows and salt spreaders where they were needed, so emergency crews could do their job.

“We can get things taken care of a lot more quickly than before,” Kanaski said.

Eliminating four phone lines wasn’t the only place that Kanaski saved money with TCE Company. Up front planning, product training and ongoing technical support provided by TCE Company enables Kanaski to administer most changes himself, because he understands how the system is set up. That can be a big plus since the road commission is up and running at 6 a.m. during the summer and can’t afford to have the phones down for any length of time.

On the rare occasion when Kanaski does get stumped, he finds TCE Company's technical support staff ready and waiting to help him. On one such occasion his boss was out on the road and wanted to access his voice mail from his cell phone. When Kanaski couldn't figure out the programming right away, he called TCE Company and technical support walked him through the process quickly and easily.

"I can't say enough good things about TCE Company's Technical Support and Customer Service," Kanaski said. "They're always most helpful with everything. I've never run into a brick wall."

Attendant Console and Remote Extensions Make Life a Whole Lot Easier

Kanaski and the rest of the Huron County Road Commission liked the reliability and convenience of TalkSwitch system provided by TCE Company so much that they later chose to add the TalkSwitch Attendant Console to their system and make things even easier.

This PC-based call-handling and call-monitoring system allows users to see right on their computer screen which lines are open, which users are on the phone and who callers are trying to reach. Attendants and users can transfer calls quickly and simply by using their mouse to drag and drop an incoming call to the appropriate extension. In some circumstances, road commission attendants don't even have to answer the call to transfer it, so callers get connected directly to the person they are trying to reach.

No longer do road commission employees have to tell callers to hang up and dial a different number when they need to speak to someone in the service buildings. Now callers can be transferred directly. It's simple and quick and callers no longer feel like they're getting the runaround.

Because the user license for TalkSwitch Attendant Console covers an entire location, all phone users at the road commission—including users in the two service buildings—can see their incoming calls at a glance on their computer screen. This permits them to take calls in the order they choose, answering important or awaited phone calls first. Additionally, the Talkswitch Call Reporting software, allows Kanaski and other managers to analyze how the seven remaining phone lines are being used in order to maximize efficient use of those lines.

The convenience of direct call transfer isn't limited to the three buildings at the road commission's home base. Cell phone numbers for foremen and managers have been programmed into the TalkSwitch system as remote extensions. This means that calls can be transferred directly to employees out on the roads or transferred from the cell phones back to the office. Kanaski said this feature has greatly simplified communications with road crews, whether it's coordinating road maintenance in the summer or getting plows out to free up roads in the winter.

Even Caseville County Park has been added as an extension to the road commission's TalkSwitch system. Although the park is not officially under the road commission's jurisdiction, the park's toll-free line is routed through the road commission office. With TalkSwitch, Kanaski was able to program the phone system so that Caseville park calls are automatically redirected to the park and road commission attendants no longer have to touch those calls. And even though Caseville is 25 miles away, Kanaski says that calling the remote extension there sounds as clear as if it were an extension just down the hall.

"It acts just like an extension a hundred feet away," Kanaski said. "It's all just one seamless system."

Voice over IP Slashes Long-Distance Bills

Kanaski and the Huron County Road Commission have yet to utilize the TalkSwitch system's Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) capabilities, but he does plan to do so in order to save even more money on high quality communications.

When implemented, the TalkSwitch VoIP features will route all outgoing calls to go out over the Internet. The calls will then be received by a VoIP gateway local to the call's destination and go right to the call's recipient over local phone lines. Long-distance phone lines are removed from the picture, so all long-distance charges are eliminated. Since Huron County Road Commission spends more than \$1,000 per month on long distance phone charges, Kanaski figures that using the VoIP services will save the commission over \$12,000 a year.

"I do see a real big advantage with that," Kanaski said.

Depend on TCE Company for Value and Service

From repairing road surfaces to clearing snow and downed limbs, it takes a lot to keep Huron County's roads in working order so folks can go about their business normally. And it all requires efficient, dependable communications. But in a rural location, like Huron County, where public dollars can be a scarce commodity, affordability is a factor too.

Huron County Road Commission chose TCE Company because of its expertise in providing phone systems with reliability and ease of use and because of the potential cost savings of more than \$14,000 per year by eliminating long-distance charges and reducing the number of phone lines.

"It's proven to be very economical plus functional at the same time," Kanaski said.

"TCE Company took on a unique situation that others said was not possible and would have major negative ramifications for failure," Gatzka said. "We performed extensive up front engineering and training so that the solution worked immediately and without problems. We do the same for all our customers."