PRACTICAL ACTION
Technology challenging poverty

CUSTOMER CASE STUDY

PRACTICAL ACTION

Practical Action is an international development charity which uses sustainable technology to help poor women and men around the world to support themselves out of poverty.

By using technology, Practical Action enables poor communities to build on their skills and knowledge to produce sustainable and practical solutions – transforming their lives forever and protecting the world around them. While headquartered in Rugby, the charity has its feet-on-the-ground in some of the most vulnerable countries in the world, where civil and political unrest, unreliable power grids and trade embargos are the norm. With each country suffering from its own unique political and economic challenges, this was a far cry from your usual Office 365 deployment.

CHALLENGE

The primary challenge for Practical Action was the deeply unreliable email communication between its offices around the world. In addition to its head office in Rugby, Practical Action has seven bases of operations around the world in Bangladesh, Kenya, Peru, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Sudan.

With each Country Regional Office (CRO) operating its own

AT-A-GLANCE

Challenge
Practical Action's primary challenge was the deeply unreliable email communication between its offices around the world. Yet with each office operating in some of the most politically and economically challenging countries in the world, implementation would be anything but easy.

Solution
Phoenix Software implemented Office 365 with hosted cloud-based email replacing the regional office's individual servers. This also included web-based versions of Microsoft's leading productivity applications – Word, Excel and PowerPoint – plus Lync, Microsoft's web conferencing service.

Benefits
Practical Action has benefited from a highly resilient cloud-based email infrastructure which it can manage centrally across the globe. Its staff can now reliably access their Outlook email and Office applications from anywhere in the world, while retaining the familiarity and advanced functionality of the Office applications they are used to.

email server in very difficult local conditions, communication simply could not be relied upon across the organisation, and central management of the email servers was simply not an option either.

Phoenix Software is certainly used to solving all manner of technical challenges in order to deliver a solution to its customers, but the diverse and challenging environments in which Practical Action operates presented a number of its unique hurdles to jump over.

These included:

- **Unreliable power infrastructures** – power supply problems are common to all of Practical Action's Country Regional Offices, however none are quite as bad as in Zimbabwe, where the sporadic nature of the power supply would result in the local mail server being shut down at least four times every single day. In light of this unreliability the local team was required to shut down the mail server every night and reboot it manually each morning too, resulting in absolutely no email communication out of office hours.

- **Civil unrest** – occasional bouts of civil unrest can sometimes make it unsafe for Practical Action's staff to attempt to access the office, so the ability to work remotely is critical.

- **Trade embargoes** – restrictions on the movement of goods can make the sharing of data difficult and would make the transition of data to Office 365 difficult.

- **Limited Microsoft presence in some countries** – Sudan domains cannot be registered with Microsoft Online Services for example.

The migration of a decentralised email system spread across eight countries is usually challenging enough, but the combination of these additional nuances created a particularly unique situation for Practical Action. Phoenix Software knew that the implementation would require a much more creative approach than usual.

SOLUTION

Since Practical Action was already a licensing customer with Phoenix Software, it sought the company's help to recommend a more reliable global email solution that could be managed centrally. Phoenix Software suggested a global Office 365 deployment that would replace each of the individual offices' own local mail servers. By migrating to the cloud-based Office 365 solution in place of the local Microsoft Exchange Servers, Practical Action would benefit from a more reliable email service that was more secure, scalable and crucially would require no onsite management for maintenance or upgrades.

The initial configuration of Office 365 was completed over a three-week period, with most of the Exchange data migrated from the on-premise servers at headquarters to the cloud platform over the course of a weekend. Phoenix Software then physically switched one Country Regional Office over to the Office 365 per weekend until the whole organisation was live, in order to minimise any disruption to the critical life-saving work that Practical Action's staff were undertaking in each country.

While the deployment itself was relatively smooth, operating in such diverse and challenging environments did present Phoenix Software with some unique challenges that it had never faced elsewhere. This included a challenging negotiation with Zimbabwe customs to export USB keys full of server data, the need to route email traffic via a different country due to a trade embargo in Sudan which prevents the activation of a domain registered in that country to work with Office 365, and even the difficulty of safely accessing the Kenyan office during a period of widespread political unrest at the time of the switchover.

BENEFITS

Since moving from server-based email systems in each Country Regional Office to the cloud-based Office 365, Practical Action has benefited from near 100% uptime of the service. It has also enabled the charity to scale back its IT resources on-the-ground since it no longer needs to manage and maintain existing applications. Other benefits include:

- **Familiarity** – unlike other cloud-based productivity and email suites, Office 365 requires

no new training for end users since they simply carry on using the same desktop-based application they are used to, like Outlook, Word, Excel etc. Even the web-based applications, which enable them to work from anywhere, work in the same way as their 'full-size' desktop counterparts.

- **Mobility** – since Office 365 is completely cloud-based, users can access their email, contacts and calendars from anywhere. Being unable to physically get into the office no longer prevents the charity's staff from being able to do their jobs.

- **Resilience** – Data is automatically and continually backed up to the cloud with Office 365. Business continuity is taken care of with Office 365's extensive Service Level Agreements and daily backups at each of the multiple local servers is a thing of the past.

- **Performance** – by routing all of the charity's email traffic through Office 365's high performance cloud servers instead of its own network, overall email performance has improved considerably, as has the speed of Practical Action's own network.

- **Microsoft Lync** – with Microsoft Lync (included with Office 365) Practical Action's staff are reaping the time-saving and collaboration benefits that seamless video conferencing and desktop sharing provides. Being able to communicate face-to-face with colleagues in other countries has also helped to bring remote teams closer together.
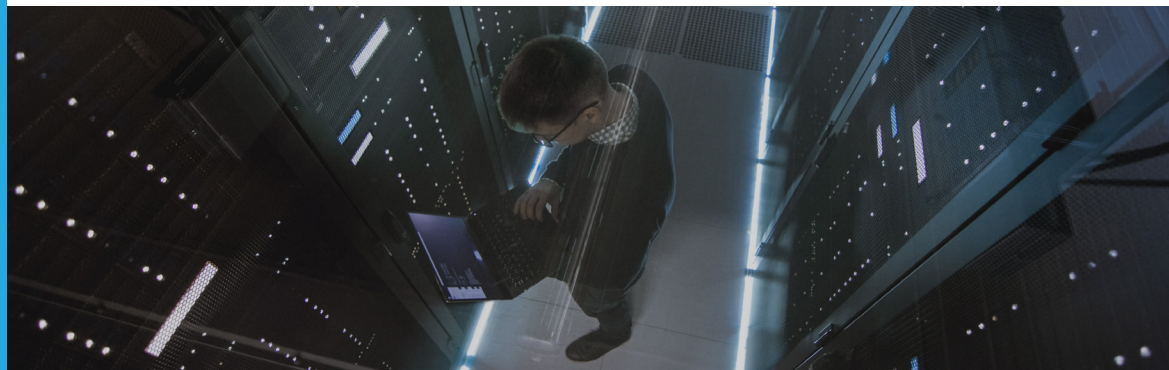
Alex Haywood, International IT Infrastructure Specialist at Practical Action comments, "Moving from Exchange-based email to Office 365 was a no-brainer for us, but we knew that our unique global footprint would cause some particularly unique challenges. Phoenix Software, however, handled the migration with absolute professionalism throughout, and certainly went above-and-beyond the call of duty on many occasions to ensure that we received no disruption in service during the transition. In the end, we've been able to improve substantially the communication between our teams around the world, boosted productivity and flexibility with cloud-based applications, and all while reducing our in-country IT support requirements. You can't really ask for more than that."

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

To find out how we can help you transform any aspect of your IT estate, contact the Phoenix Team now on:

01904 562200
hello@phoenixs.co.uk