

Fidelus helps *DonorsChoose.org* unite a distributed workforce with Cisco BE6000

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César Bocanegra,
Chief Operating Officer,
Donorschoose.org



DonorsChoose.org was created in 2000 with the simple idea of connecting teachers in need of classroom supplies with citizen donors willing to pitch in. Fast forward to 2014 – with big endorsements from Oprah, Stephen Colbert and Bill and Melinda Gates along the way – and the crowdfunding charitable organization grew to 75 employees working from offices in New York City and San Francisco, and 10 employees based in home offices across the country.

Although free, cloud-based tools like Skype and Google Hangouts were adequate collaboration tools while the organization was a lean upstart, the time had come for more scalable, business-grade solutions that could unite a distributed workforce and provide reliable voice and video interaction between co-workers and external contacts.

“We wanted all of our people to feel like they were in the same room together regardless of whether they were in our offices or working remote,” says César Bocanegra, Chief Operating Officer.

The organization eventually landed on Cisco Business Edition 6000 as the best solution for their needs.

The search begins for a Cisco solution provider that gets their mission.

César and his team quickly put out an RFP to find a Cisco solution provider that could install and provide training for a Business Edition 6000 package that included video phones for all staff members, the Collaboration software suite and Catalyst switches and routers to support VoIP and video. They were hoping to find a solution provider with solid Cisco Collaboration expertise, thorough trainers and attentive customer service. But just as important was a partner who understood the unique non-profit mission and culture of DonorsChoose.org. After engaging with several potential solution providers, none of which seemed to be a good fit, things instantly clicked when they met with New York City-based Fidelus.

"Fidelus was the only Cisco provider that took into account the fact that we had to stretch our budget as much as possible in executing this project because every dollar saved meant another dollar towards helping more teachers and students across the country." says César.

But the affinity DonorsChoose.org felt from Fidelus went beyond the strength of what they put on paper.

"From the beginning of our conversations, Fidelus was very user-focused. They kept talking about our model, instead of the Fidelus model. We very quickly realized that the core values and culture of Fidelus were aligned one-to-one with ours." César elaborates on what those shared values are:

"Flexibility, innovative thinking, relentlessness, a user focus and most importantly an open environment where people are not afraid to speak their minds about what is working and what isn't."

This sense of rapport only grew stronger during the installation and training phase, which extended over several months in the latter half of 2014. In César's eyes, the Fidelus collaboration consulting engineer and trainer, became a true extension of his own team during those months.

"The trainer was always flexible with her time and was just amazing at the training. She made it so much fun for our staff. And the engineer was always great about being there from early morning to late at night helping us work through all the remote phone configuration challenges."

Better collaboration tools are making a tangible difference for every employee.

Six months in to using the new gear DonorsChoose.org is seeing a real impact on their communications in all directions.

"All the phones have video cameras, which makes our interactions go that much smoother," says César. "You pick up the phone and instantly see the other person's face in high definition. There are a lot fewer misunderstandings now."

César cites the situation of their chief technology officer as one case in point. He recently moved to San Francisco but still has a team of 15 developers to manage back in New York. Fidelus engineers worked with him to optimize his Cisco gear and WebEx so that he can reliably hold his team meetings and one-on-ones remotely. "Now he only comes back to New York about once a quarter. Without his Cisco setup I honestly believe he would be travelling back once a month."

Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries have been the rest of the 10 remote workers who are mostly fundraisers. Before, they had been holding conversations with donors, grant providers and other important stakeholders over cell phones with sometimes poor reception and background noise. Now the team is equipped with high-quality Cisco video phones and Bluetooth headsets in their homes, which allows them to have much more professional interactions with outside people whose support is critical to the success of DonorsChoose.org.

With a solid collaboration environment now in place, DonorsChoose.org is already looking ahead to the future. César and his team plan on integrating larger Cisco TelePresence endpoints to take video communication to the next level.



Contact Us

-  solutions@fidelus.com
-  1 866 FIDELUS
-  240 W. 35th St. 6th Fl. New York, NY 10001