

Customer Stories: Follett Corporation



Follett Corporation makes the grade when it comes to helping students and schools succeed,

thanks to AT&T FlexWareSM



- **Business needs** - Educational service provider Follett, which has succeeded for 145 years by continually evolving to meet customers' needs, looked to reinvent its network environment.
- **Networking solution** - AT&T FlexWareSM provides strong, highly secure connections between Follett's bookstores, enhancing agility, and simplifying network management.
- **Business value** - The AT&T software-defined wide area network supports Follett's legendary customer care by connecting all aspects of its business and strengthening network redundancy and security.
- **Industry focus** - Educational product and service provider
- **Size** - \$3.2 billion in annual sales

About Follett Corporation

Follett Corporation provides educational services and products to colleges, schools, and libraries, handling the details that make life easier for these organizations. The company operates more than 1,200 bookstores on college campuses and is a wholesaler of pre-owned college textbooks. It also supplies K-12 schools and public libraries with books and audiovisual products.

The situation

Technology drives every aspect of Follett's business, from the e-commerce platform in its retail stores to inventory management and logistics systems in its distribution centers and warehouses and the applications used at its headquarters and data centers. Over the years, the company used an early wide area network (WAN) technology like frame relay, then upgraded to multi-protocol label switching (MPLS). As its business continued to grow, Follett looked for new ways to accommodate the thousands of employees and customers who depend on its network.

Solution

Follett chose AT&T FlexWareSM, a network virtualization solution that enables deployment of multiple network functions on one device by turning network functions into software instances. Adding FlexWare to its existing MPLS network connecting their bookstores helped the company save money and enabled a robust, redundant network environment.



Inspiring learning, one student at a time

Follett, one of the nation's largest privately held companies, provides books, software, and other products to 80,000 schools and public libraries. Every day its products and services interact with more than half of U.S. students. Tom Matt, Follett Corporation VP for Enterprise Infrastructure, said the family-run company is a trusted partner with schools from pre-K through higher education, working to make sure that people have access to the materials they need.

"Our purpose statement really says it all," Mr. Matt said. "Our goal is to improve the world by inspiring learning and shaping education, and that's usually one student at a time or one book or service at a time."

The world has changed dramatically in the 145 years since Follett was founded, and the company has continued to grow its share of the education market by taking advantage of new ways to deliver content. Technology has become central to Follett's business model. "Education really is driving the technology changes," Mr. Matt said. "Anyone who has had a student or been a student in the last 15 years knows that technology has changed the way students learn and teachers teach."

Many key Follett family members remain closely involved in the business. "They have a heart for education and for helping students succeed," Mr. Matt said. "I think that's always been the company's driving force—making sure we can offer the right products, solutions, and services to enable teachers to teach and students to learn in the easiest way possible."

Support for near-real-time data delivery and web-based applications

When Follett began opening campus bookstores, most of its systems were self-contained and there was little need to support near-real-time transactions. As education changed, however, Follett kept pace by taking advantage of innovations, and today is considered a leading provider of education technology.

"We have technology in every part of our business; it's in our retail stores and we have a large e-commerce platform," Mr. Matt said. The company also uses technology to operate its distribution centers, warehouses, data centers, and even corporate and divisional office locations. "We use technology everywhere, and the only way to make it work is to have everything be connected."



Physical textbooks are no longer in demand, so the company has focused on delivering digital content efficiently. “We have to be able to provide license keys to students right when they buy the e-book,” he said. In addition, because many students rely on financial aid, Follett needed to make sure students could access that funding when they came to purchase their books. Enabling access was complicated. Each institution had their unique needs and Follett ensured all 1,200 bookstores met their requirements.

“It’s like working with 1,200 small city governments—everything is completely different because each campus does things in its own way,” Mr. Matt said. “We try to stay flexible in our technology to make sure that we can integrate with whatever systems they have. I think that’s what sets us apart from our competitors—we offer custom solutions.”

One thing its bookstores had in common was a demand for more bandwidth. “We just couldn’t provide enough bandwidth with the solutions we were using, in light of the growing use of web-based apps and need for near-real-time data,” he said. “We also needed to be able to turn up the dial when we needed more bandwidth, and potentially turn it down to save money

if we didn’t need it.” Follett needed a technology partner that could satisfy its customers’ growing need for connectivity, bandwidth, and security.

A robust, redundant, resilient environment

Follett’s long history with AT&T made its decision easy. The company chose AT&T FlexWareSM, a network function virtualization service with failover capabilities that enables deployment of multiple functions on a single device.

Mr. Matt said he and his colleagues researched available options from 5 networking providers before choosing AT&T, in part, because it was easier to add the AT&T SD-WAN to its existing AT&T MPLS network. “We didn’t have to change the infrastructure that connected to our store networks, which saved us time since we didn’t have to re-architect a lot of our back-end systems,” he said. “That saved us a considerable amount of money, too. Change is inevitable, but if I don’t have to make more than I need to, I’m much happier.”



Follett's connections to store networks, data centers, and other properties run on the AT&T infrastructure. "We have a very robust environment, utilizing the MPLS cloud through AT&T," Mr. Matt said. "By combining SD-WAN and MPLS, I was able to take advantage of the resiliency and redundancy that were already there, so if I had a data center failure, my traffic would automatically fail over to the other data center and the business would continue to run. That's truly a positive."

Getting the right solution

Before deploying SD-WAN to its 1,200 stores, Follett conducted a five-location pilot project, choosing campuses with a variety of different circumstances. "We started with a campus in the middle of downtown Chicago, where we were walking through underground tunnels to get to the phone room. We also picked a school in the suburbs that had no cellular service in the room, a community college, a large university, and a small private school," Mr. Matt said.

All 5 locations were in the Chicago area, which enabled Tom Matt and his team to be present for site surveys, installations, and cutovers. "We wanted to watch

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Follett Corporation



the process to make sure that if it didn't work as we expected, we could tweak it as needed for the other locations, and that paid off big time," he said.

The pilot worked well. "We took it slow on purpose because we wanted to make sure that we did it right. The result was so good that it allowed us to say, 'This is the right solution. We want to move forward with it.'"

Reaction from store managers has also been favorable. "The cutover process was pretty painless, and they notice the difference in bandwidth, so they're all very positive and thankful for the change," he said.

With enhanced speed and security, everybody wins

Managers and customers appreciate the added speed at which the stores can now conduct transactions. The company's old network would bog down, especially during busy times at the beginning of semesters. "The change is noticeable, so students can get in and out of the store faster," Mr. Matt said. "I think everybody is a winner in the end."

The company is considering taking advantage of some of the additional options that SD-WAN supports, Mr. Matt said, including split tunneling to improve performance and better protect the data. The security this capability offers us is huge.

Security is important because companies like Follett that process credit card transactions must comply with the stringent Payment Card Industry (PCI) Data Security Standard.

From a company perspective, Mr. Matt said, AT&T understands Follett's business. "They've been able to help us find the right solutions, not only here with the SD-WAN but in the data center infrastructure and other parts of our business as well." On a personal level, he appreciates that his account team doesn't try to push services or products. "They're not wasting my time or the company's time. When they come to the table, they know what we need."

A game-changer for the future

Tom Matt also likes the fact that AT&T, a company nearly as old as Follett, understands how to help customers move forward, as it has experienced its own business transformation over the course of its long history. "I respect the ability of AT&T to move forward with technology changes," he said.

"AT&T has had to make changes quickly to stay competitive and remain a leader, and that impresses me," he said. "That's a big reason why I think they're a great company." Mr. Matt said he plans to seek help from AT&T with future projects, including transitioning from Follett's SONET OC-192 fiber optic network to

AT&T Ultraviolet Network Service to boost throughput between the company's data centers.

As Follett continues to grow, Tom Matt sees the possibility of using additional AT&T products. "If we split some of our remote offices and open new warehouses, AT&T 5G could become a real game changer for us. It may be a few years away for Follett, but that's the next thing I'm looking at. Since AT&T is the leader in 5G, we'll definitely team up with AT&T for that project."

He believes Follett will continue to count on AT&T. "Through our alliance with AT&T, we have a highly available, resilient and redundant network that lets us serve our customers 24/7 with everything we need to run our business," he said.



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