

Customer Stories:

Interop Associates, Inc.



AT&T Business helps Interop
connect virtually
seamlessly
with partners and clients

- **Business needs** – To stay in touch with clients and partners, Interop needed voice and data networking that was highly reliable and affordable.
- **Networking solution** – AT&T Software-Defined Wide-Area Network (SD-WAN) supports high-quality voice services, speedy internet connections, and improved network reliability. AT&T Office@Hand was paired with SD-WAN, since AT&T SD-WAN enabled Interop to prioritize voice traffic in the policy manager.
- **Business value** – Enhanced performance and dependability, increased efficiency, and significant savings
- **Industry focus** – Manufacturers' representatives
- **Size** – 10,000+ customers

About Interop Associates, Inc.

Interop Associates is a manufacturers' representative of semiconductor and electronic component firms, working on behalf of some of the top companies in the industry. Its three locations in Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina cover six southeastern states and the spectrum of customer market segments, including industrial, consumer, telecom, datacom, lighting, metering, automotive, and military.

The situation

Ongoing problems with its voice service led Interop to replace its T1 connections with MPLS circuits. The new lines improved voice quality, but reliability remained an issue, and the network was a considerable expense for the small company. Interop needed a highly reliable and affordable voice solution to connect workers at its three locations with their partners and customers.

Solution

Interep decided on AT&T Software-Defined Wide-Area Networking to enhance the performance, efficiency, and security of its voice and data communications. The solution delivers excellent quality, fits within their budget, and—when paired with AT&T Office@Hand—helps Interep prioritize voice traffic.

A long-term commitment to its partners

Interep Associates has been the premier manufacturers' representative firm in the southeast since 1972. The company, which represents best-in-class manufacturers, has thrived during market cycles, mergers and acquisitions.

The company has had a long-term commitment to working with its distribution partners, employing a dedicated distribution manager as well as branch champions. Interep is responsible for a significant percentage of sales for most of its distributor partners and is routinely invited to participate in customers' architectural system-level discussions. The company touches well over 10,000 unique customers with its synergistic products and services.

A rep firm's most valuable assets are its people. Interep Associates has a very stable, long-term technical salesforce, which Bob Sorrells, Interep Field Applications Engineer, sees as a source of the company's continuing success. "We've been around for a long time while other rep firms have come and gone. There are very few of us that have been here for decades," he said.

Phone problems and finger-pointing

Headquartered in Huntsville, Alabama, Interep also has locations in Duluth, Georgia, and Raleigh, North Carolina. Because it's a small company, it doesn't have a dedicated IT professional.

"As our field applications engineer, my primary job is to assist engineers and help customers use the parts that we represent," Sorrells said. However, with this technical background, Sorrells said that he's "turned out to be the de facto IT/phone person."

For years Interep used a traditional telephone system with a large PBX at each location but made the move to Voice over IP a decade ago. The company installed T1 lines for voice and cable modems for data in each office, but the system was inadequate from the start. "In spite of the dedicated T1s, we had complaints of voice quality, and there was a lot of finger-pointing trying to get to the root cause," he said. "My goal was redundancy and reliability, and I had just the opposite of that. When one of our two lines went down, the whole thing went down."

To improve the situation, Interep installed dedicated MPLS circuits at each location. "We over-killed it, but the vendor was glad to sell it to me," Sorrells said. "The voice quality was good, but it made for a tight budget." As the MPLS contract expiration date drew near, the company looked to move to a new solution that better fit their needs.

“SD-WAN works as advertised.”

An AT&T representative suggested deploying AT&T SD-WAN, a virtualized solution that enables organizations like Interep to build high-performance wide-area networks using hybrid and broadband internet links. To address the phone challenges the company faced, the account team also recommended AT&T Office@Hand, a cloud-based solution that provides voice, fax, text messaging, and audio and video conferencing. It lets employees work virtually anywhere from almost any device.



Sorrells admits that he was hesitant to consider the solutions for a couple of reasons. “First, I was cautious about AT&T because it’s a big company. Would they be responsive?” he said. “But I was primarily cautious about having any voice quality complaints by going from MPLS to an SD-WAN, which I had never heard of.”

A meeting with an AT&T Internet of Things expert convinced him that SD-WAN was the way to go. “It was

a deep-dive technical presentation from an AT&T engineer, who recommended having two diverse WANs,” he said. “The AT&T SD-WAN prioritizes voice traffic packet-by-packet and sends it on the best WAN at that instant in time,” he said. “This really does solve the voice quality technical problem in a fresh way.”

The meeting gave Sorrells the confidence to move forward with a software-defined wide-area network. “I put my career on the line and took the risk, signed the papers, and we moved forward with AT&T,” he said. “It turns out that the SD-WAN works as advertised.”

Finding new ways to do business

By implementing AT&T Office@Hand along with SD-WAN, Interep can prioritize voice traffic in the policy manager, but that’s not all.

“We keep finding new things that we can do with it,” Sorrells said.

For instance, videoconferencing was an important tool that Interep staff used to communicate with customers. The company used a stand-alone videoconferencing platform, but it allowed only one employee at a time to use it. With Office@Hand, each salesperson has a separate account.

“They can do conference calling and screen sharing whenever they like,” Sorrells said. The staff has quickly learned how to use the program to its full advantage. “I’ve been on calls with our folks who routinely will pass control over to the engineer or to the customer and say, ‘Hey, show us what you’re seeing on your screen,’ or ‘Show us that spreadsheet and then we’ll pass it back,’” Sorrells said.

Staff can use Office@Hand from their office or at the customer site. “It just opens up so much for us that we didn’t have before,” he said.

For example, there are still times when employees need to fax something. “Every phone number or every user account can send and receive their faxes directly from or to their computer,” he said. “I’m sure somebody told me that was one of the features, but we’ve found it to be one of the many pleasant surprises of the system. They use the Office@Hand app all the time, so you really can’t tell they’re not there in the office.”



Great voice quality, significant savings

The SD-WAN network was an immediate hit with Interep employees. “I’ve had zero complaints of voice quality, and our internet speeds have jumped from 30 MBPS with our cable provider to a solid 100 MBPS,” he said. “All our users are very happy.”

For redundancy, AT&T recommended that Interep keep its cable modem. “We now have true diverse

WAN redundancy for the first time ever. If the cable or fiber is cut, we’re still in business,” Sorrells said. “It didn’t cost a lot extra and gave AT&T a lot of credibility by recommending that we stay with a non-AT&T product. That has been great advice.”

Interep gets immediate alerts about any network issues. “Occasionally, I’ll get a notification that the cable modem went offline at 2 a.m. and back on shortly afterwards. I suspect our cable provider does maintenance during those early hours,” he said.

Sorrells was impressed by the way AT&T managed the project. “The AT&T group that does the SD-WAN is super responsive and professional. In one of the planning calls, I could tell after a few minutes they were very comfortable with my network and the deployment,” he said. AT&T offered to do the cutover after work hours, but Interep opted to make the switch during a workday. “They sent technicians to each office at the same time and made the transition, and nobody lost any momentum at all. No problems.”

“I’m very glad I went with AT&T because we have great voice quality now,” Sorrells said. “And we’re saving about \$1,500 a month.”

“My goal was redundancy and reliability, and before AT&T, I had just the opposite of that.”

Bob Sorrells
Field Applications Engineer, Interep Associates, Inc.



Exceeding expectations

Interep's SD-WAN deployment represented its third major network change in the decade that Sorrells has worked for the company. Based on previous deployments, he said he expected delays and difficulties. That wasn't the case. "Everything exceeded my expectations," he said.

His concerns about the responsiveness of a company as large as AT&T have disappeared. "I thought I'd find some part of this whole thing disappointing. But so far, everything has been great," he said. "I have nothing negative to say. There's no room for improvement. It's gone perfectly."

Interep is so pleased with the service it receives from AT&T that it's considering other solutions. "Our account rep has been keeping me up to date about AT&T Cybersecurity products and services, and so we will probably take a look at our cybersecurity strategy," he said.

"We now have true diverse WAN redundancy for the first time ever. Everything exceeded my expectations."

Bob Sorrells

Field Applications Engineer, Interep Associates, Inc.