HIGHLIGHTS

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Charity organisation needed to scale their technology to connect communities of people experiencing homelessness

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Transitioned to Cisco Meraki for enterprise-grade connectivity in the office and vans

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Cisco Spark enabled them to efficiently communicate between staff and volunteers
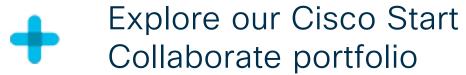
CISCO START SOLUTION

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Cisco Spark

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CISCO AND ORANGE SKY – RECONNECTING AUSTRALIA'S HOMELESS

In 2014, two young blokes from Queensland, Nic Marchesi and Lucas Patchett, did something truly inspirational that would dramatically improve the lives of tens of thousands of people around Australia. They started providing free laundry services to people experiencing homelessness.

They had an old van, put a couple of washing machines and dryers in the back, and took to the streets. Orange Sky Australia was born.

Today, just three years later, Orange Sky is a nationwide operation, and its mission has evolved from providing clean clothes to positively connecting communities. Cisco Start is playing a key part in that evolution.

THE CHALLENGE

Having started out as just two young blokes and a second-hand van, Orange Sky now employs more than 20 full-time staff, operates 16 laundry vans, three shower vans and one hybrid van, and has more than 1,000 volunteers around Australia. Together, they wash over 6 tonnes of laundry every week.

And from their original suburban garage office, they've grown to a multi-storey space in Brisbane with a workshop, data room, storage facility and even a printing lab where they print their own t-shirts.

Not surprisingly, this exponential growth introduced some significant technological challenges. They could no longer make do with the cheap, 'home-made' network they'd been able to get by with previously. They needed a secure, enterprise-grade networking and data storage infrastructure.

They also needed much better communication and collaboration tools. According to co-founder, Lucas Patchett, "We'd tried a number of collaboration and video conferencing tools in the past, but we've never found a solution we were happy with. This is mission-critical for us, because the more efficient we are in our office, the more efficient we are out on the road and in the community."

Of course, general internet connectivity also impacts efficiency, and Orange Sky was struggling there too. "Having slow internet and poor tools for collaboration was hindering our growth, and it was frustrating for everyone," said Lucas.

"For example," he said, "all our vans need to be internet enabled, so they can send back shift reports containing the names of all volunteers present, their location, the times they operated, all the people who did their washing or had a shower, and so on. This gives us the information we need to manage the operation from head office, and gives our volunteers the structure they need to work efficiently. It's like a checklist of tasks they need to remember everything, to help both their customers and the next shift. If we have dodgy internet, we can't do any of this properly."

"It's not just about the business efficiency, either. As we've matured as an organisation, our goals have changed too. We've realised that, for people experiencing homelessness, it's not just about having clean clothes, it's about being connected. They feel disenfranchised and cut off. So our mission has

changed from simply improving the hygiene standards of the homeless to positively connecting people, and our technology plays a critical role in this. Many of the people who use our service have mobile devices, but they usually don't have SIM cards. If we can give them reliable WiFi in our vans, they can contact their families, access government websites and help services, and just generally stay in touch with the world."

Cisco hasn't just helped us innovate and scale," said Lucas, "they're helping us change the world,"

– Lucas Patchett, Co-Founder, Orange Sky

THE SOLUTION

In March 2017, Cisco's state manager for Queensland, Michael Reid, saw Nic and Lucas speak at a business seminar. "I absolutely loved their story," he said. "So I connected with them on LinkedIn the next day to see if there was anything we could do to help. We had a meeting a week later."

At that meeting, Lucas was very impressed by the simplicity and ease of use of the products in the Cisco Spark and Meraki portfolio. "Michael showed us around the office and walked us through some tech, and we were blown away, especially the video conferencing and remote control dashboards. Everything was clean, simple, easy to use and perfect for office collaboration. Anyone could use it."

"And to top it off," said Lucas, "they were clearly passionate about our cause. They offered to look after us with big discounts and donated time from their experienced engineers. It was an offer that was too good to refuse."

So over the next three months, Cisco integrated a tailored Cisco Meraki networking and communication solution for Orange Sky. This included all routing, switching and wireless at head office, collaboration solution, IP video surveillance, an enterprise-grade firewall, and fast, reliable public WiFi at their vans.

THE OUTCOME

Orange Sky's head office team now has access to an intuitive, elegant Meraki dashboard that allows them to easily monitor their vans and manage their volunteers, and control all on-board devices and appliances.

"Just getting the Cisco Meraki access points installed was a massive plus; we immediately noticed a significant difference in speed and in our own productivity,"

– Lucas Patchett, Co-Founder, Orange Sky

Our efficiency within the office is up," he said. "Just getting the Cisco Meraki access points installed was a massive plus; we immediately noticed a significant difference in speed and in our own productivity. But once the Cisco Spark Boards were up and running too, it was like we were able to shift up to an entirely new gear. We hold regular video calls with staff and volunteers around Australia, delivering training, chatting about how they're going, and discussing any challenges they're facing. Keeping people informed is the most powerful thing you can do, particularly as a volunteer-heavy organisation. And thanks to Cisco Spark, we're now doing it far better than before."

The new technologies have also enabled additional innovation. "Our developers are constantly working on new things, like the new volunteer portal we just released," Lucas said. "It's a good feeling, knowing that our IT infrastructure can now keep up with our ambitious plans for growth."

But according to Lucas, perhaps the biggest indicator of success is the fact that no-one on the ground has complained about the new systems. "They're using everything exactly as we need them to."

FUTURE

Nic and Lucas have big plans for Orange Sky and believe Cisco will be an integral part of its business growth. "We see a long and beneficial relationship ahead with Cisco." Lucas said.

"We've improved our services a lot, and we're also looking at training and employing people who

currently use our services. We want to pay them to actually run the vans, so we can provide laundry services to commercial organisations like cafes and hospitals," Lucas said. "This will give us the funding we need to grow, while providing employment to people experiencing homelessness."

In the meantime, Orange Sky has launched a vehicle in the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Lockhart River, which will help to improve hygiene standards and provide an opportunity for locals to have a yarn. "We feel very privileged to be accepted into the Lockhart River community and be part of the journey towards improved health outcomes," Lucas said

After that, the boys are looking to expand into the US, and they have the personal assistance of John Chambers, the former Chairman and CEO of Cisco globally. He's providing advice and guidance on their expansion, and has also connected them with the Cisco Global team responsible for handling community initiatives around world.

FINAL WORDS

"Cisco hasn't just helped us innovate and scale," said Lucas, "they're helping us change the world. We're extremely happy we happened to meet Michael at that event in Brisbane, and we're very grateful for all their support. We look forward to a long working relationship that will help many people."

Michael Reid, Cisco's state manager for Queensland, agrees, "this is more than a one-off engagement for us; I think we'll be on the journey with them for good."