

Transcript of Westpac Wire's Tech in 10 interview with Paul McKenna, Westpac's head of workplace services 16 September 2021

INTRODUCTION: This is Tech in 10 by Westpac Wire, a 10-minute chat with industry experts about Westpac's latest tech news and trends.

EMMA FOSTER (EF): Westpac has given another lift to its in-branch technology, this time replacing its ageing telephone systems with a mobile first solution. And joining me, Emma Foster, to talk about the upgrade is Paul McKenna, the bank's head of workplace services. Hi Paul, thanks for joining us for today's Tech in 10.

PAUL McKENNA (PM): Thank you. Thanks for having me.

EF: So, Paul, sounds like it's out with the old phone systems and in with the new in the bank's branches. Can you tell us a bit more – what changes have been made and why?

PM: Yeah, sure. So it's all triggered by NBN, really. So as NBN rolled out past the branches, just like NBN rolled out past our houses, it made the telephony and the telephone solutions actually obsolete. So many of us sort of made decisions at the time whether or not, do we want to keep our landline? And I know personally, I looked at that and thought, oh, look, pretty much that's only been used by telemarketers. And maybe nan and pop may have called me sort of once in a while. So it was quite an easy decision to make, from a household perspective and obviously we've got our mobiles everywhere. But from a branch perspective, customers call the branch all the time. It's a really important service. They like that local interaction. So if we took away the telephone, the desk phone and that kind of capability and replaced it with mobile phones, we needed to solve the problem of if a customer called the branch, then everyone's mobiles needed to ring at once within the branch. And then if they left a voicemail, then everyone would need to access that voicemail and then make sure that the customer's been responded to. So that was the challenge in that decision with the branches, and we needed to solve that. And the way we solved that was through the (Microsoft) Teams calling solution.

EF: Okay, so tell us a little bit about how that works.

PM: Yeah, sure, sure. So we had a lot of the ingredients to begin with, like the three big key ingredients. So we just recently rolled out 5800 iPhones to our front line staff, and that's really given them the digital tools to talk to the customers and really drive digital advocacy. So we had mobile phones out there, which is a big tick, so that was one big ingredient. The second big ingredient we had was we recently upgraded the branch network. So we used a technology called software defined networking, and all the branches now have two NBN connections and a 4G connection, really strong Wi-Fi, and the architecture is such that the branch now accesses cloud based services such as Teams in a fast manner. So that was the second set of ingredients we had. The third ingredient was the use of Teams. The use of Teams within the bank has just exploded over the last 18 months with obviously COVID has really brought that. But within Westpac, we're actually the largest and most comprehensive user of Teams within Australia. And that's a real, special thing for us. So when we looked at the solution of having a mobile phone with a Teams application on it, which takes calls and uses the branch Wi-Fi, that all comes together to be the Teams Calling solution.

EF: And just to clarify, Paul, this is only for calls coming into the branches of the bank, not into the bigger call centres.

PM: Yes, that's right, so the contact centre solution is different. So their requirements are quite different in the sense of complexity of skill based routing and other things that is in the contact in the solution. So this is very much for the branch folk.

EF: And just out of interest, I guess I am a little bit surprised that there are so many calls coming into branches still. How many calls are we talking about?

PM: Yeah. So we're seeing on average ten and a half thousand calls a day. So it's obviously a service that our customers really want. They obviously want to call up the local branch and have a conversation. So it's really interesting to see how much demand there is really for those conversations.

EF: Yeah, interesting. Okay. And I guess this new ability for the for the branch staff to have the mobile Teams solution has also been helpful through the challenges of COVID and working remotely from the branches. Is that right?

PM: Yeah, it's definitely helped. The solution provides a level of flexibility that hasn't been there before. So if you're working in a certain branch and you need to move to another branch and take calls, you can still do that. You can take calls across multiple branches and you don't need to be within the branches and you can even be at home and still take calls. So that's the strength of mobility, and the strength of the solution is really the flexibility. So with COVID over the last while, it's been very useful in that regard to provide that flexibility to make sure that our customers are still having their calls answered and their needs met.

EF: So you've mentioned, Paul, that the solution has been made possible by the rollout of the new software defined wide area network or SDWAN across all branches, which in fact we covered in another Tech in 10 so if anybody wants more on that, they can listen to that. Can you tell us a little bit more about other technical challenges that you had to face in the tech upgrade?

PM: Yeah, sure. So SDWAN really gave us a strong foundation. So there are actually no issues of that whatsoever, actually gave us a springboard for the solution. Where the challenges in the in the solution and the implementation came in is we're really stretching the use of Teams and the Teams capability. So we had a lot of interest in that regard from Microsoft out of the States and we had the product manager, the head of Teams, who runs that whole product for Microsoft, really interested in what we were doing in the rollout and we were on the phone to him once a month to help us with implementation. And also we could influence the product. So we would make suggestions around what we're doing and we could see them being delivered in the product. And we've actually got a series of enhancements that Microsoft have taken on board to implement over the next six months, which are really going to enhance the experience. So it was really Teams and pushing the boundaries of what Teams can do, in a good way, with the support of Microsoft, which were the main sort of technical challenges of the project.

EF: And the team has taken to using the Microsoft Teams approach ok?

PM: Yeah, absolutely. It's a big change. You can imagine from picking up a phone on the desk to having to answer it through an application on your phone. I've been really impressed with how that change has been adopted, and we can see that through the statistics around the number of calls which are answered, responded to and the voicemails which are actioned. So it's been great. Although a big change, a big shift

EF: And just turning to the investment, I mean, we know that fewer customers are coming in to branches these days in favour of banking online and presumably fewer are calling, although we've discussed that the numbers are still quite high. So some people may be wondering, is now a good time to be investing in new branch technology infrastructure?

PM: Yeah, I think it's really interesting times - we spoke about COVID previously around the uplift in Teams, we've really been drawn into the digital world, even more so during these times. But I think there's something else that's happening in parallel. The local community and the attachment to the community, I think, is also increased. And I feel that when, just in my morning walk this morning, the amount of people that said hello to me, who are very engaged. You can really sense the local community and the importance of the local community increasing in everyone's mind. So we've got this kind of two quite powerful forces happening. We've been drawn in more to the digital world, but I think we also value local community higher than we used to. So the Microsoft Teams solution and the branch solution really fits that very nicely because it is a digital, mobile first solution for branch employees but its also a very local experience, a very community based experience, because you are calling your local branch. So really, that's where this solution really fits the bill.

EF: And looking into the future a bit, are there any other technology upgrades for branches that are in the pipeline that you could talk to us about?

PM: Yeah, I think the interesting thing about going to a product like Teams is that it's a cloud based service. So I mentioned a pipeline of improvements that we've got lined up with Microsoft. Teams gets updated every month, so every month we experience a better improvement. And so will the branch employees, they will experience that. And as those improvements come through, so it's less now around the big step changes, but more around incremental improvements. But in saying that the natural evolution that we're looking at is going from a voice interaction to a video interaction, you know, with our customers. And that's not a big leap from where we are today. So actually having video embedded in the mobile app or in the browser. So that's the technology that we're exploring now and the natural evolution of what we're doing with this solution.

EF: Well, perhaps we can have another chat when you do progress those solutions. But for today, Paul, thanks for your time.

PM: Thanks very much for having me

EF: And to everyone listening, thanks for tuning in and for more bite sized tech updates from Westpac, feel free to subscribe to Westpac Wise podcasts. Until next time, bye for now.