velocloud™
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KinderCare
LEARNING CENTERS

INDUSTRY
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

HEADQUARTERS
PORTLAND, OR

KEY CHALLENGES
• Large, distributed network
• Lack of visibility into partner operations
• Service and availability needed improvement
• Costs not in line

SOLUTION
QOS Networks with VMware SD-WAN

BUSINESS RESULTS
• Reduction in mean time to resolution for Internet outages
• Better integration with suppliers
• Increased visibility of IT processes
• Cost savings

SD-WAN Enables Education Provider's Growth Strategy

KinderCare is America's largest provider of early education programs. With more than 1400 locations spanning more than 40 states, KinderCare serves 185,000-plus families in its programs every day. The company operates neighborhood childcare centers, corporate-sponsored centers for employee childcare, and before- and after-school care programs.

Problem situation

Until recently, KinderCare outsourced its IT department, but this arrangement no longer met the needs of the quickly growing company, according to Dennis Baker, Vice President, IT Technical Operations and Architecture. "As we transitioned into a growth organization, our leadership quickly realized that building internal technical capabilities was a strategic necessity," says Baker.

One of the critical focus areas that Baker looked at was the network needs of the centers. "It's a fairly large environment with so many centers across the country, and our existing partner operated as a black box," he says. "Our availability was a lot lower than we would have liked, and our costs were not really in line with the market. And I just think overall service wasn't really there. They just weren't very motivated to take care of us, despite our significant size. Aggregators often treat you like you're a prisoner, since they feel the effort to move on is too cumbersome for a customer to undertake."

RFP process

KinderCare started the process of doing a request for proposal (RFP) for a new network, splitting it into two sections. One was only about getting cost-effective, reliable access with Internet circuits. "We felt that our price overall for the circuits wasn't necessarily market competitive, so we wanted to bid the whole thing out. At first, we thought we'd likely bid it out to all the aggregators because it would be too hard to manage it ourselves," explained Baker.

The second piece of KinderCare's RFP was for the SD-WAN technology. This where the market is going, so it wanted a solution that would give them some visibility into their

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DENNIS BAKER
VP, IT OPERATIONS AND ARCHITECTURE,
KINDERCARE

network plus flexibility in managing the network.

"The RFP was a real learning experience for us," says Baker. "We started to talk to all these providers and then we recognized, 'Hey, we're fairly large, right? We should be getting treated a lot better.' And there was a ton of interest in our RFP. It was actually difficult to manage because people just came out of the woodwork. I guess one thing I'd say about the SD-WAN market is that everyone thinks they're an SD-WAN provider, whether they are or not. It seems that anyone can hang out their shingle and say they're SD-WAN."

KinderCare began to focus on finding a partner that really had a differentiated SD-WAN offering. "We wanted to align with a market-leading platform delivered by a partner that brings a lot of expertise, has done large implementations, and is really going to treat us like one of their top customers. And for us being in childcare, the way that we deliver our services to our customers is a lot more 'white glove' than what you might see in a retail equivalent. We needed a partner that really understood that and would help us deliver on that model," says Baker.

The RFP attracted a lot of interest from service providers. "Some of them weren't tied to any particular SD-WAN platform," says Baker. "They said they'd figure out how to implement any product we wanted. That was counterintuitive to what we were looking for. We didn't want to end up with a partner that wasn't really an expert and that was going to leave us in a bad spot."

Solution selection: QOS Networks and VMware SD-WAN

Then QOS Networks came to KinderCare's attention. QOS led their bid with the VMware SD-WAN™ by VeloCloud® solution. They had done some very large implementations and were differentiated in that they were doing a lot of integrations to make things easier for KinderCare to use the solution. "This platform lends itself well to co-management, which we like because we have a small network team and we don't want to run the network day to day," says Baker. "Nevertheless, we want to have visibility and understand what is going on. We don't want another black box situation. We want to hold our partner accountable but still be involved in the engineering decisions. With VMware SD-WAN and QOS, we found that option and it works really well for us."

VMware SD-WAN checked off several of the criteria that KinderCare had in mind. The ability to co-manage the solution with a partner: check. Improve availability: check. Control of the traffic and visibility into it: check. A solid path to voice over Internet protocol (VoIP): check. A market-leading platform: check.

While the VMware SD-WAN platform is definitely important, Baker says the partner they chose is even more important. "We went with a managed service from QOS," he says. "They operate our network day to day, so if a problem arises, they deal with it for us. They talk to the access providers if we have circuit issues, and they've built a failover design using cellular service that has changed our availability significantly."

Results

KinderCare was able to significantly reduce its access aggregators and purchase direct from the circuit providers because QOS took over managing the support aspect. Leveraging direct relationships saved KinderCare significant money and provided preferential treatment in addressing issues or new implementations. "We saved very significant recurring dollars and actually saw providers investing in us to build our broadband coverage to meet our needs—much of which was facilitated by QOS' capabilities. With those savings we were able to easily fund best-of-breed equipment and the associated implementation costs for our centers. That was a big unlock for us."

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QOS
NETWORKS

PARTNER

Founded in 2012, QOS Networks has taken the network services space by storm. Read about our *history* as the fastest growing managed network services provider.

When they first implemented the SD-WAN, QOS discovered that more than 300 of the existing circuits were throwing lots of errors and were not delivering the bandwidth that KinderCare had contracted for. QOS went to the circuit providers with data from the VMware SD-WAN devices to demonstrate the errors they were seeing on the circuits. KinderCare had been blind to that information until VMware SD-WAN provided that level of visibility. Getting the circuits in better shape is critical for the company's VoIP strategy.

Implementation of VMware SD-WAN started in mid-2019 and now all but about 20 centers are fully deployed. In addition to saving significant dollars on Internet access, KinderCare has seen other significant benefits as well. "Our mean time to resolution on Internet outages has gone down by 70 percent," says Baker. "Also, QOS has set up integrations for us that make it easier to work with other suppliers. For example, there's an integration with ServiceNow that allows tickets to flow between KinderCare and QOS, and soon to other third parties like a partner that provides some hands-on support for us. That provides us with great visibility into where we are with our IT processes."

KinderCare is on a growth trajectory, most notably through acquisitions. VMware SD-WAN, and especially the integration work done by QOS, has simplified the process of bringing the new centers into the KinderCare fold.

Lessons learned

All in all, the migration to VMware SD-WAN has gone well for KinderCare, but there are still "lessons learned" worth sharing with others.

• Leverage RFPs to force the right competition among your potential partners. The detail and complexity of SD-WAN is different across organizations. Just make sure all the vendors are on a level playing field and are pressured to offer the best price and service possible to win your business. Ultimately, there is a lot of opportunity to save your organization money that can be leveraged to improve the service you can deliver.

• Find a partner that you feel really comfortable with and that has the experience in working with the solution you choose. If the vendor says they can support any SD-WAN solution, push back on their level of expertise to do so. No one can be an expert on every platform. Also, talk to the SD-WAN manufacturer to understand who their recommended partners are. Who will they stand behind?

• Don't underestimate the effort and change management required to implement these solutions at scale. Even with a seasoned partner, the specific requirements of each environment will create challenges. Test a lot, pilot slowly, and let deployments soak prior to pushing at scale.

• Don't settle for a black box solution. SD-WAN provides so much visibility and data that you never had before. Use that data for leverage with service providers that have kept you in the dark. You can have the visibility without having to operate the solution yourself.

• Be wary of the claims that manufacturers make about SD-WAN, as anyone can say they have an SD-WAN solution. Is it a true SD-WAN solution or did they add this functionality onto an existing solution? Also, consider the roadmaps for these products. With considerable industry consolidation happening, you could be left with a platform that is not a priority for the manufacturer. Do your research on what these vendors really provide. Certain companies are considered market leaders for a reason.

For more information about VMware SD-WAN, visit *www.velocloud.com*.
Sign up for a free hands-on *evaluation* of VMware SD-WAN.

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