



Microsoft System Center Customer Solution Case Study



Landscaper Integrates Acquisitions, Tightens Security with Better Desktop Management

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Professional services—
Landscaping

Customer Profile

ValleyCrest Companies is the largest full-service landscape company in the United States. The California-based company employs 11,000 people across the country and has sales of U.S.\$1 billion.

Business Situation

The company's IT staff was challenged to deploy new desktop software and install security updates on the company's fleet of client computers. This hindered the integration of newly acquired companies, as well as overall business agility.

Solution

ValleyCrest deployed Microsoft® System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to gain automation efficiencies in asset management, software and security update deployment, and reporting.

Benefits

- Improved business agility
- Increased service levels
- Improved IT productivity
- Annual labor savings of U.S.\$12,000 on security update work

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Robert Hampton, Director of IT, ValleyCrest Companies

ValleyCrest Companies is the largest full-service landscape company in the United States, with 11,000 employees across the country. ValleyCrest has tripled in size over the last decade, through acquisitions and organic growth, causing the number of client computers it manages to more than double. IT staff found it time-intensive to integrate new acquisitions and to deploy client software companywide, including security updates that would protect the network. ValleyCrest deployed Microsoft® System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to improve asset management, software deployment, security management, and desktop issue reporting. Now, IT staff can integrate acquisitions into the network within a weekend. With detailed reports on desktop assets, the IT staff can better deploy new software; and, by automating software updates, the company has improved service levels and reduced IT workloads.



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Situation

Founded in 1949, ValleyCrest Companies is the largest full-service landscape company in the United States, offering landscape architecture, development, and maintenance services. ValleyCrest has been awarded some of the most prestigious landscape projects in the country for master-planned communities, hotels and resorts, golf courses, shopping centers, corporate facilities, private estates, and urban parks and habitats. It has sales of U.S.\$1 billion and more than 11,000 employees.

In the landscape construction industry, companies are typically more eager to spend money on bulldozers and cranes than on computers and software. However, in the 10 years between 1998 to 2008, as ValleyCrest tripled in size, opened offices across the country, and became more competitive, management acknowledged the important role that technology played in helping the business grow and operate efficiently. E-mail messaging became nearly as critical to the business as reliable lawnmowers and trucks.

As the number of information workers grew, so did the company's fleet of desktop and notebook computers. By 2008, ValleyCrest had 1,800 of them, distributed across the country. “As our company grew by acquisition, it became harder to manage desktop and notebook computers located in an increasing number of states,” says Robert Hampton, Director of IT for ValleyCrest Companies. “We had problems deploying new software applications, upgrades, and security updates. It took a week or more to bring up a new office, which was an impediment to smooth operations and business growth.” In 2007 alone, ValleyCrest acquired seven companies; in the past 10 years, the company has acquired about 20 companies.

Apart from the work involved in integrating newly acquired companies, it took the IT staff

20 to 40 hours each time it needed to install or upgrade a software application on all of the company's client computers. A roving band of support technicians spent nearly all its time on the road performing this work, branch by branch. Because the work was so time-intensive, involving manual installations on every client PC, the IT staff put off software upgrades that could benefit the business. For example, the IT staff saw advantage in upgrading the company to Microsoft® Office Professional Plus 2007, but dreaded the work required to perform the upgrade. It had taken three years to install Office Professional 2003 companywide, during which time the IT staff had twice as much work in supporting two versions of the program.

Keeping systems protected was another chore and worry. ValleyCrest was often weeks behind in applying routine software updates from Microsoft and other vendors because it took so long to package, test, and distribute them. Consequently, the company's network was occasionally infiltrated by malicious software, which took down entire offices at times. “Six years ago, we had several problems with desktop infections,” says Hav Mustamandy, Network Operations Manager for ValleyCrest Companies. “When desktop systems were down, the business in that office ground to a halt.”

In 2004, ValleyCrest implemented Microsoft Systems Management Server version 2.0, and later Systems Management Server 2003, to automate much of the manual software and update deployment work. However, many other aspects of desktop management, including operating system deployment, managing software updates, and gaining accurate asset intelligence, remained resource-intensive, and the IT staff sought still greater control and efficiency in managing and optimizing its desktop infrastructure.

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Hav Mustamandy, Network Operations Manager, ValleyCrest Companies

Solution

Because 95 percent of the ValleyCrest network is based on Microsoft software, and the company was already managing its desktop environment using Systems Management Server 2003, the IT staff migrated to that program's successor, Microsoft System Center Configuration Manager 2007, when it became available. They liked its easy integration with other Microsoft programs they use, such as Active Directory® Domain Services, Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 data management software, Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, and System Center Operations Manager 2007, which it uses to monitor the company's 300 servers.

“We also liked the improved reporting features in System Center Configuration Manager 2007, which would give us a much more detailed look at our infrastructure, down to the processor type and memory amount in every desktop computer and server,” Mustamandy says.

Helpful Partner Assistance

ValleyCrest worked with En Pointe Technologies, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and Microsoft Solution Large Account Reseller from Gardena, California, to deploy System Center Configuration Manager 2007. As a Microsoft Large Account Reseller, En Pointe is one of only a handful of companies qualified to provide hardware, software, professional services, and Microsoft licensing for customers, which saves customers money and simplifies solution delivery.

En Pointe first installed Windows Server® Update Services, used to deploy Microsoft product updates to computers running the Windows® operating system. En Pointe then installed Microsoft System Center Configuration Manager 2007 on an HP ProLiant DL460 server at the primary site in Calabasas, California, and on Dell PowerEdge 1500 servers at 73 secondary sites in branch offices. All

installations run the Windows Server 2003 Enterprise Edition operating system.

“It was very worthwhile, having En Pointe involved,” Mustamandy says. “We learned quite a bit from them; they showed us how the software updates worked, how to take a software and hardware inventory, how to configure the software deployment features, and how to create reports. The knowledge transfer to our staff was extremely valuable. If we had done this on our own, it would have taken a lot longer. We spent just 10 days deploying System Center Configuration Manager 2007.”

Hampton adds, “Working with En Pointe has been great. They handle our entire Microsoft licensing relationship, as well as coordinating the services group. We have been very happy with their services organization, too.”

Efficient Desktop Management

ValleyCrest uses System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to gain automated efficiencies and new functionality in the following areas:

- **Asset management and inventory.** Before its annual budget cycle, the IT staff uses System Center Configuration Manager to quickly produce an inventory of the company's hardware and software assets. It can quickly see every system that falls outside the company's minimum desktop configuration specification and require that local offices budget to upgrade those systems.
- **Software deployment.** ValleyCrest can now confidently proceed with its planned implementation of Office Professional Plus 2007 to all 1,800 client computers. Because ValleyCrest refreshes its client computers every three years, one-third of the user base will get the new program when they receive new hardware. The IT staff will

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deploy the program to the other two-thirds of the computers using System Center Configuration Manager 2007.

- **Security updates.** System Center Configuration Manager 2007 is better integrated with Windows Server Update Services than was Systems Management Server 2003, making it easier for ValleyCrest to deploy security updates.
- **Reporting.** With System Center Configuration Manager 2007, the ValleyCrest IT staff knows exactly how many security updates were successful.

Broader System Center Integration

ValleyCrest also uses other members of the Microsoft System Center family to manage its infrastructure. Most notably, it uses Microsoft System Center Operations Manager 2007 to monitor the performance and reliability of the company's 300 servers, including SQL Server database servers, Exchange Server messaging servers, and Windows administrative servers. ValleyCrest uses management packs to extend these monitoring capabilities to System Center Configuration Manager 2007 and to servers performing backup, Web security, and authentication for the network. Whenever the IT staff needs to deploy management packs, it uses System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to ascertain configuration information for each server to ensure that the hardware can accommodate the management pack. This eliminates deployment errors and rework.

ValleyCrest is evaluating the Hyper-V™ virtualization technology built into the Windows Server 2008 operating system as a way to simplify and speed server setup and reduce costs. It is also looking into Microsoft System Center Virtual Machine Manager 2008, which aids in physical-to-virtual server migration and enables single-console

management of the physical and virtual server landscape.

Benefits

ValleyCrest now has much greater business agility by being able to integrate company acquisitions faster and deploy new productivity-boosting software sooner. Its 1,800 client computers are more secure, because the IT staff can respond faster to security vulnerabilities and deploy fixes in a matter of hours. Automated software deployment has significantly reduced travel time for support personnel and made the IT staff more efficient and effective.

Improved Business Agility

With an optimized desktop infrastructure, ValleyCrest can be more responsive to its industry and customers. “Having state-of-the-art desktop management tools helps us integrate acquisitions faster, which helps our company grow,” Hampton says. “Our typical integration timeframe is over a weekend, which is phenomenal.” In one acquisition, ValleyCrest was able to integrate a company with more than 100 desktops in seven locations in one weekend. “As soon as these desktops are on our network, we can perform inventories and get patches out. There is no delay in making new employees productive.”

In fact, its technology infrastructure has become a big competitive differentiator for ValleyCrest. “Our mergers-and-acquisition people know that when we're looking at a target company to acquire, technology will not be an obstacle,” Hampton says. He explains that the company's ability to perform basic computer-dependent tasks, such as issuing paychecks, is critically important immediately following an acquisition. “Our field staff has to get their paychecks, or they walk,” Hampton continues. “With one acquisition, we added 1,000 new people, and we were able to issue their paycheck the very next

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week. That was only possible because of the desktop infrastructure that we had in place.”

Increased business ability also comes from the IT staff’s deeper understanding of the company’s desktop environment. Because they have detailed hardware and software configuration information at their fingertips, the IT staff knows whether or not it can deploy new software applications. For example, the IT staff recently wanted to deploy a new application that would aid the company’s project managers, but didn’t know if those individuals’ computers could accommodate the program. Using System Center Configuration Manager 2007, the IT staff ran a quick configuration report and was able to immediately deploy the new software to the systems that could run it and upgrade the systems that could not.

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Increased Service Levels

The company’s desktop computers are now promptly updated with the latest security updates, and the IT staff receives confirmation of update successes. “With System Center Configuration Manager 2007, security updates are performed with 100 percent accuracy,” Mustamandy says. “This is critical for us. Even one unpatched desktop could be a huge vulnerability to our network.”

The IT staff can have an update bundled and distributed within a day, versus the weeks it took before. “Several years ago, we would have whole branches down for days because of malware that slipped through our desktop infrastructure,” Mustamandy says. “We haven’t had outages like that for years, since moving to Systems Management Server, and

later System Center Configuration Manager. We used to really worry about the latest viruses lurking outside our firewall. We just don’t worry about them anymore. Security issues do not keep me awake at night.”

Improved IT Productivity

The IT staff has reduced its desktop management workload by automating inventory and asset management, and software and security update deployment. Whereas it previously took 6 to 7 hours to collect computer asset information for each branch office—with only rudimentary data provided by local staff—the IT staff today can gather detailed hardware configuration information over the network, down to the amount of memory and the processor type in each computer. “Using System Center Configuration Manager 2007 is a big timesaver in inventorying our infrastructure and gives us far better information for making decisions about future technology purchases,” Hampton says.

Deploying new software programs and routine security updates is also much faster. “We used to spend 5 to 10 hours a week deploying patches and security updates,” Hampton says. “Some weeks we couldn’t even do it, due to resource limitations. Today, we use Microsoft System Center solutions to cut our resource usage to about an hour a week. The Microsoft tools have enabled us to automate most of these processes, easily saving \$12,000 annually in labor.”

For the company’s upcoming Office Professional Plus 2007 rollout, ValleyCrest will be able to get the new software on every desktop within one year, versus the three years that it took to roll out previous versions of Microsoft Office. ValleyCrest will also realize significant savings by not supporting two versions of Microsoft Office over a three-year period.

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about En Pointe Technologies products and services, call (310) 337-5200 or visit the Web site at: www.enpointe.com

For more information about ValleyCrest Companies products and services, call (818) 223-8500 or visit the Web site at: www.valleycrest.com

The staff can package and deploy new security updates in a few hours. When ValleyCrest recently acquired a company in Washington, D.C., it was able to use System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to deploy the company's full suite of line-of-business, productivity applications, and all recent security updates on the acquired company's 25 desktop systems. "Instead of updating these 25 machines manually, we used System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to push out the software, saving days of work," Mustamandy says.

The company's remote IT staff travels 50 percent less today, and when they do visit branch offices, they are able to spend their time doing higher-value work than installing routine software updates. "Our roaming IT folks can now spend their time handling more project-related items, training branch staff on new software solutions, and soliciting input for future efficiencies," Hampton says. "By automating many of our desktop management tasks, we have reduced administration and complexity, and enabled our IT staff to do more with fewer people."

Microsoft System Center

System Center solutions help IT pros manage the physical and virtual information technology (IT) environments across data centers, client computers, and devices. Using these integrated and automated management solutions, IT organizations can be more productive service providers to their businesses.

For more information on Microsoft System Center please visit: www.microsoft.com/systemcenter

Software and Services

- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
 - Windows Server 2003 Enterprise Edition
 - Microsoft System Center Configuration Manager 2007
 - Microsoft System Center Operations Manager 2007
- Technologies
 - Active Directory Domain Services
 - Windows Server Update Services

Hardware

- HP ProLiant DL460 servers
- Dell PowerEdge 1500 servers
- Dell OptiPlex desktop computers
- Dell Latitude D and E series notebook computers

Partners

- En Pointe Technologies