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AXA Future Proofs New HQ building with Class E_A Shielded Solution

Case Study

Challenge

AXA is a leading provider of wealth management and financial protection products and services through brands including Australian Casualty & Life, ipac and Summit. The company had outgrown its old headquarters in Melbourne’s CBD. For the new head office building at Docklands, AXA required a future-proofed 10G cabling solution that would cover its needs for 10-plus years, from a vendor that would serve the company’s purposes for 15-20 years.

Strategy

AXA and its services consultant for the Communications Cabling Infrastructure package, UMOV Lai Communications went to unusual lengths to find the best network cabling infrastructure solution. They engaged independent testing house Data Link Verification to test rigorously offerings from five vendors, ultimately choosing the AMP NETCONNECT shielded Class E_A solution from Tyco Electronics, to be installed by Lanec Services. As part of the selection criteria, performance and reliability were key requirement factors.

Results

In a tight eight-month timeframe Lanec Services installed some 8,000 points of Class E_A shielded cabling – 56 kilometres – by the September 2007 deadline. Lanec described it as a “dream” installation, to which AMP NETCONNECT contributed technical support and on-schedule deliveries through their distribution channel partner, Page Data. AXA moved into the new building in May 2008, to a fully operational, highly fault-tolerant, future-proofed network cabling system as the foundation of their IT network.



AXA Future Proofs New HQ Building With Class E_A Shielded Solution from Tyco Electronics

With \$45.6 billion funds under management, total gross inflows of almost \$10.8 billion, over 1,050 advisers and close to 2,000 employees, AXA is a leading provider of wealth management and financial protection products and services through brands including Australian Casualty & Life, ipac and Summit. AXA Australia is part of the Global AXA Group, one of the world's largest financial services groups, with an enviable track record in meeting the superannuation, investment and insurance needs of 50 million customers globally.

AXA Australia's new 10-storey headquarters building at Docklands, Melbourne, houses more than 2,500 staff and consultants who use variety of computer applications through the company's metropolitan area network (MAN).



Above: AXA's HQ building communications network rely on AMP NETCONNECT high performance Class E_A shielded cabling system.

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THE CHALLENGE

When the time came to move to new Australian headquarters, AXA made two key decisions. First the company would find a network cabling solution that would future-proof it for more than 10 years, from a communications cabling vendor that had a track record of commitment to a physical presence in Australia and a local support team to service AXA over the life of the building. Secondly AXA would engage an independent consultancy to put technology from various vendors through a rigorous testing process given the fluid status and marketing "hype" surrounding the Class E_A standard development process.

AXA Tech's Asia Pacific network support/messaging team leader, Paul Mazziotta, called for a modular RJ45 solution that would run at a guaranteed speed of 10G, problem-free. He sought to avoid future bottlenecks as network solutions continue to develop. The company also wanted to run voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) over the network, and to have power over Ethernet (PoE) capabilities.

AXA engaged technical consultancy Umow Lai Communications to design a highly fault-tolerant cabling system capable of accommodating frequent moves, additions and changes. Umow Lai also had to help with an exhaustive vendor and product selection process to ensure the best technical and commercial offer was realized by AXA. The key questions were: which cabling vendor would be chosen, and whether a shielded or unshielded system would be chosen. Independent test organisation Data Link Verification (DLV) was selected to test various vendors and their offerings through a controlled test bed installed by Lanec Services at the current AXA site.

THE SOLUTION

A test bed of the short listed vendors was set up in AXA's old Collins Street offices. Each vendor had (12) links of nominal length from 30m to 80m, of either shielded or unshielded cabling, or a mix of both which was an option of the chosen vendor.

Responding vendors were (5) of the major vendors represented in the Australian / NZ market. Whilst some vendors offered up both UTP and Shielded solutions for testing and evaluation, AMP NETCONNECT only offered a shielded solution given the belief from the outset this system would offer the highest performing system to AXA.



Above: Back view of AXA's high density cabinets utilising Class E_A shielded cabling system.

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DLV performed permanent link, channel and alien crosstalk testing on each solution, using the Fluke DTX 1800 network cable tester. The testing was performed to ISO/IEC Class E_A current draft as at January 2007.

As testing progressed, it became clear that unshielded products lagged behind shielded in performance, and some compared poorly against their manufacturers' marketing claims in this regard. The three vendors advocating at least some shielded cabling were selected for final appraisal, before AMP NETCONNECT emerged as the winner, based on system performance and the overall commercial "value proposition" for AXA.

Sean Wooster, who heads Umow Lai's Communications & Technology Division, said the testing was carried out because there had been "a lot of contradictory and confusing marketing" on cabling performance. As expected, the independent testing identified shielded solutions as giving better performance as well as better protection against alien crosstalk which is a key qualitative parameter for measuring the ability of a Class E_A system to support 10Gb Ethernet.

"AMP NETCONNECT's shielded cabling has future-proofed AXA in performance parameters," said Sean. "Shielded cabling in general demonstrated a better range across all test parameters, and overall cost was a big selling point. The companies proposing unshielded solutions claimed it would work and deliver cost benefits, but on test it was proved that shielded performed better across all parameters. Testing showed there was no cost disadvantage from using shielded cabling - it was the most cost-effective and ticked all the boxes."

Sean concluded: "For AXA, costs were high on the agenda, but after the testing exercise it really was a no-brainer."

THE IMPLEMENTATION

AMP NETCONNECT designer and installer Lanec Services was responsible for installing horizontal and backbone cabling, and cable tray support system. Overall the company put in some 8,000 points of Class E_A shielded outlets - some 65 km in all - combined with Cat 6A shielded RJ45 outlets. According to Lanec's Project Manager, Craig Wallis, the challenging project met a tight eight-month timeframe. Each of the 10 floors in the quadrant-shaped building floor plates had four communications rooms with a 90m run in each quadrant. Ceiling space for air-conditioning and data cabling was very restricted, so "Snake Trays" were used to weave cabling in and out of tight spaces to great effect. AXA completed their move into the building in May 2008.

"It was very successful" says Craig. "The AMP solution was excellent from the installation point of view, being completely reliable. Shielded cabling meant that testing was a breeze, and we didn't have to concern ourselves with field testing for alien crosstalk. There were none of the issues you get with some Cat 6A products. The AMP SL-series termination tool allowed us to reduce the expected termination time and provide a high level of consistency over the 16,000+ terminations."

He added that Tyco Electronics and their distributor Page Data contributed to the successful delivery of the project by having the required inventory of product and



Above: Front view of AXA's high density cabinets utilising AMP NETCONNECT shielded patch panels, AMP-TWIST SL Jacks & Shielded patch cords.

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delivering on time. It was a dream installation from our point of view, leaving everyone happy with the outcome of the project. AXA Australia is happy and we are too.”

Sean Wooster said “We were very happy with Lanec Services, who delivered a problem-free installation. They are one of the most professional outfits we have dealt with, being very pro-active and knowledgeable. They go out of their way to try to find the best solution rather than just follow directions.”

Sean’s praise for Lanec Services on the project was echoed by Paul Mazziotta, AXA Tech’s Asia Pacific network support/messaging team leader. Paul said: “The installers were fantastic, they did a wonderful job. They were always there to listen, to support queries, and responded quickly and effectively.”

THE RESULTS

Today AXA Australia operates from its new headquarters building, which features a fully operational, highly fault-tolerant, future-proofed network cabling system. More than 2,500 staff and consultants are using a variety of computer applications through the company’s metropolitan area network (MAN).

Paul Mazziotta says AXA has a cabling solution capable of running at a guaranteed speed of 10Gpbs without any issues. It enables VoIP to run on the network, while Power over Ethernet (PoE) switches can be introduced as required. He says the benefits of 10G speed will not be experienced on the desktop for a year or two, since 100Mbps cabling goes first to staff’s VoIP phones at present. However, the 10G network is working well and its expansion capability means the future is secure.

“Ultimately we have a quality installation that future-proofs AXA for 10-plus years, and will avoid bottlenecks as network technologies and our bandwidth requirements continue to develop,” said Paul.

He said Tyco Electronics service had been fine as there had been no real issues to resolve during the construction given the collaborative planning done up front by Tyco Electronics, Page Data (distributor) and Lanec Services. As well as AMP NETCONNECT’s solution being one of the highest performing, their shielded 10G was more flexible than competing products in terms of sizing of cable pathways and routing to the work area outlet locations ie workstations, skirting duct, etc.

Paul said initially he had been unsure of which technology would be best suited for their new building given the significant step up from the current 250Mhz Cat6 based system to the new 500Mhz Cat 6A class. Given all the marketing hype the test bed accompanied with the independent testing was the best approach. From the outcomes of the independent testing it was clearly obvious that the PiMF based shielded solution offered AXA the best performing network cabling platform for their 10 year plus expected occupancy in the building at Docklands.