

# Focus Services Crushes Call Center Latency, Boosts Security with Cato

## About FOCUS Services

Focus Services is a global outsourced call center provider with 10 call centers in North America, three in Central America and one in the Philippines. Before Cato, Focus Services connected its North American call centers with carrier-based MPLS, with VPN connections to its cloud-based Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems. International locations had to rely on VPN connections to North American customers and the cloud. Vendor-purchased firewalls and Web filtering solutions provided security.

## The Challenge: Call Center Latency

Once upon a time, call centers relied on analog telephone lines to deliver the services their revenues depend on. Now that analog lines have been replaced with digital VoIP and call center Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) systems have largely moved to the cloud, fast, reliable WAN connections are critical to call center success. With more call center employees working from home—particularly since Covid-19—fast remote access is a growing requirement as well.

Focus Services, a global outsourced call center provider with 10 call centers in North America, three in Central America, and one in the Philippines is no exception. Not only must its WAN connections be fast, stable, and reliable, they must also deliver low latency or else voice quality will degrade, according to Bill Wiser, Vice President of IT for Focus Services.

Before Cato, Focus Services relied on carrier MPLS to connect its North American call centers, but had to settle for Internet VPN's internationally because MPLS options were just too expensive. "We were gaining a lot of international business, so better, more cost-effective global connectivity options were vital," says Wiser.

**Latency** and poor voice quality plagued its international long-haul VPN connections until Focus deployed an intelligent BGP routing solution. “The solution could monitor and prioritize traffic based on usage and switch providers and routes if latency became an issue,” says Wisner. “It was fairly effective, particularly in the Philippines, where traffic might take 12 to 15 hops to get to the U.S.” However, while latency improved, there were still issues and limitations.

“We had to deal with a complex piece of hardware and handle a fair amount of administration, including updates,” says Wisner. And while the intelligent routing solution could analyze traffic and switch providers when necessary, it still had to send traffic over the sometimes unreliable Internet. “There were still many times when we had to go in there and promote certain types of traffic manually to mitigate latency issues,” says Wisner, “and the solution didn’t handle inbound traffic nearly as well as outbound.”

## **Focus Services Investigates SD-WAN, Chooses Cato**

Even though most of the issues lay abroad, Focus decided to begin its SD-WAN and Cato journey in North America initially, then spread the solution to Central America, with the Philippines rollout expected in 2021.

“We looked at SD-WAN as a way to get rid of our expensive domestic MPLS circuits and use the savings to add some Internet redundancy with different providers,” says Wisner. “We could then use SD-WAN to offer rollover reliability of the network.” At first, Focus worked with a solution provided by one of its technology partners, but things didn’t go very well. “They were reselling one of the big mainstream SD-WAN solutions,” says Wisner, “but the vendor had little experience with it, so they were struggling. It didn’t seem like the right solution for our call center case anyway.”

Wisner sought a more customizable solution, particularly when it came to resilience and one that had a good international presence so he could eventually roll out critical international locations into the solution without much effort. That was when another technology partner introduced Focus to Cato.

“They thought Cato could provide all we were looking for, including some of the features of the existing intelligent routing solution we liked, together with all that SD-WAN automation and ease of management.”

Cato connects all global enterprise network resources — including branch locations, mobile users, and physical and cloud datacenters — into a single secure, global, cloud-native network service. With all WAN and Internet traffic consolidated in the cloud, Cato applies a suite of robust security

services to protect all traffic.

Connecting a location to Cato is just a matter of installing a simple Cato Socket appliance, which connects to the nearest of Cato's more than 55 globally dispersed points of presence (PoPs). At the local PoP, Cato provides an onramp to its global backbone and security services. The backbone is not only privately managed for zero packet loss and 5 9's uptime, it also has built in WAN optimization to dramatically improve throughput. Cato monitors network traffic and selects the optimum path for each packet across the Cato backbone. Mobile users run across the same backbone, benefiting from the same optimization features, improving remote access performance.

## Cato Delivers the Goods

It didn't take long for Wiser to settle on Cato.

"We looked at some other solutions but only tested Cato because it was much more cost effective and easier to use than the others," says Wiser. "The manageability of Cato was also pretty awesome. We love being able to pinpoint network issues and use the visual log to dive into them. We never had this visibility with our previous firewalls."

Cato's converged backbone was another deciding factor, particularly for its Central America locations. "The other solutions were still working off installed lines," says Wiser. "We liked that we could get on that WAN that Cato has already put a lot of time and money into and use it to drop out close to the endpoint. Long -haul traffic from international locations to customers in the U.S. now gets MPLS-like performance. That has really helped our sales and deployment." The fast backbone connection most of the way to its ACD cloud service was a big plus.

"QOS was always a struggle before Cato, says Wiser. "It's pretty awesome to hit that Cato network and see that traffic prioritized all the way through to the cloud, rather than just close to our site."

Focus also liked using dual active/active ISP routes to the local Cato PoP. "Our intelligent routing solution was just a best route tool," says Wiser. "Now we can duplicate traffic across both providers rather than just failing over, which is huge when you're dealing with voice traffic. Voice doesn't degrade nearly as often as it did before."

## Cato Cures Covid-19 WFM Woes

Focus didn't incorporate Cato's security services at first because it already had its own firewalls, Web filtering, and other security capabilities in place. That all changed when Covid-19 struck.

“Like other companies, we had to move a lot of people home for work, including call center reps and our administrative staff. As we added hundreds of work-from-home users to our Cato account, we started ramping up its security services too. Now we’re using Cato’s internal traffic filtering and Web filtering to take over some of the things we were doing with our firewalls. It all happened so fast, thanks to Cato, and was a life saver.”

Cato has now replaced Focus Services’ mainstream vendor firewall/VPN solutions, which were originally serving only about 30 admin and IT users. “They were pretty limited compared to what Cato offers.”

Cato’s malware protection and IPS are big goals for the future. “Covid-19 slowed us down a bit, so that’s definitely down the road. Before Covid we had lots of great plans, but they were delayed.” All in all, Cato has been a boon to the company’s call center business. “We’re very happy with the product and look forward to expanding its use to the Philippines.

**Bill Wiser,**  
**Vice President of IT, Focus Services**