

VERTICAL:	Manufacturer
HEAD OFFICE:	United States
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT:	USA, United Kingdom, Scandinavia
LOCATIONS:	15
EMPLOYEES:	400

PlayPower Taps Cato to Streamline its Global Network, Boost Business Agility, and Improve Security

About PlayPower

PlayPower is a leading manufacturer of premier commercial recreational equipment, from commercial playgrounds to floating boat docks. Before Cato, the company's global network consisted of two MPLS WAN connections and an Internet-based VPN connecting more than 400 employees across 15 sites. Assets were distributed across the company's physical and cloud datacenters. Branch office Internet traffic was backhauled to Internet gateways at the corporate headquarters. Local datacenter and branch office VPN servers provided remote access.

The Challenge: M&A Complexity

Organizations growing via mergers and acquisitions (M&A) often end up with a complex mix of service provider and point solutions that create significant IT operational and performance challenges. Rationalizing diverse infrastructure not only simplifies the network, it makes the business more agile and responsive.

PlayPower, a leading manufacturer of premier commercial recreational equipment, is a case in point. Through a series of mergers and acquisitions, PlayPower found itself with a mix of MPLS services and Internet-based VPNs connecting its 15 sites. The complexity and diversity of the network created a host of operational challenges that Alfred Sobrinho, Vice President of Information Technology at PlayPower, knew could only be eliminated through network simplification.

With so many different types of services and equipment, running the PlayPower's complex network was incredibly time consuming. "Like most mid-sized companies, we don't have a huge staff of CCIEs," says Sobrinho. "We needed a network that was easier to administer and run."

Several of PlayPower's locations lay outside of its MPLS provider's network, leading to delays and service issues. "In some rural locations, it could take a long time to get a new site on board with MPLS," says Sobrinho. "There might only be one or two telcos to choose from."

Once sites were connected, the backbone often proved unstable, causing problems for users trying to connect to applications and share resources. "Even IT staff had difficulty connecting to other locations," says Sobrinho. "The thought of someone in Pennsylvania providing helpdesk services to users in California was basically out of the question, as it meant crossing two or three networks."

Maintaining the company's security infrastructure also proved challenging. As with many companies, PlayPower had an on-premises SIEM system that needed continuous monitoring and updates. "We didn't have the resources to have someone sit there all day, monitor security events and rule out false positives," says Sobrinho. "It made sense to give that function to someone who does this for a living," he says. Sobrinho decided he had to create a single unified network that made all services and assets available to everyone.

"We wanted to locate services where they were needed, without any bandwidth or other network constraints," he says, "and we wanted to provide services across all of our different brands and business units with a single IT team."

PlayPower Evaluates the SD-WAN Market, Selects Cato

Sobrinho began looking into SD-WAN, reaching out for help to a trusted advisor on infrastructure issues to PlayPower. "We looked at ease of use and price/performance ratios. It was particularly important that the proposed SD-WAN solution work in-line with our current firewalls," says Sobrinho. "A forklift upgrade was out of the question."

Sobrinho vetted all of the major SD-WAN providers, "but Cato looked really good," says Sobrinho. Cato connects all enterprise network resources—including branch locations, the mobile workforce, 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.

After evaluating Cato, PlayPower implemented a proof of concept (POC) in an office it was looking to move to a different location. The results were so positive that they chose to replace their firewall appliances with Cato Security as a Service. "By the time the POC was over, we were no longer considering our own firewalls," says Sobrinho. "We were ready to return the router for the new

location because they were going to use the Cato Socket to do the routing,” says Lewis. As PlayPower rolled Cato out to the other sites, Sobrinho decommissioned MPLS services.

Benefits with Cato

The move to Cato provided PlayPower with both tangible and intangible benefits. With Cato, PlayPower could replace a hodgepodge of MPLS services and Internet-based VPNs with a single network supporting the entire organization. The IT team could now deliver services everywhere, supporting all the company’s divisions and business units.

Cato’s simplicity and cloud architecture yielded significant operational savings. Management and support were mostly handled by Cato, rather than PlayPower’s IT staff. “If you need specialists, such as CCNEs, you need more IT people and a bigger network team to support the same kind of networking capabilities you get with Cato,” says Sobrinho.

Cato’s flexibility let PlayPower reduce its network costs. “With Cato, we can use any available last mile provider or service,” says Sobrinho, “which means we can negotiate rates and make providers compete to keep our costs down,” he says. “The Cato Sockets are truly plug and play, so we don’t have to do all that routing and deep network configuration we used to do.”

Cato gave PlayPower a built-in onramp to the cloud. “Cato’s agentless cloud capabilities make integrating leading cloud providers and hosting centers so easy,” says Sobrinho. “You have those connections already without having to configure dedicated IPsec tunnels to the provider.”

So positive was the initial foray into SD-WAN that the team decided to expand the relationship. A few months later it became the second customer to go live with Cato Managed Threat Detection Response (MDR) service. With Cato MDR, Cato engineers monitor the network for key security events, alerting the customers only as needed.

“Rather than having a bunch of warm bodies sifting through the traffic, Cato uses data mining to drill down to the few events that warrant human attention,” says Sobrinho. “I have an analytics and applications background, so that approach makes a lot of sense to me. Cato’s SOC team reaches out to us with an alert and one of our IT members responds with the appropriate action,” says Sobrinho. “We’ve been very happy with that service.”

A Fast Work-from-Home Ramp-up

As with many organizations, the spread of Covid 19 forced PlayPower to shift employees to

working from home on a large scale. “It meant more than doubling the number of remote workers,” says Sobrinho. Cato made it easy.

“With Cato, we didn’t have to worry about adding VPN servers,” says Sobrinho. “All it took was a single phone call. Within a day, the extra VPN capabilities were deployed. No need to monkey around with switches, concentrators and cabling.”

Cato’s flexible cloud architecture was a great benefit when companies had to adapt to Covid and vacate their physical offices. “PlayPower was able to take the entire workforce across all its sites and business units remote in a day or two with no loss of productivity,” says Sobrinho. “It was remarkable that we did not have to frantically add VPN concentrators or network infrastructure like our peers and competitors who were on legacy networks and took weeks and months to transition to a remote work-from-anywhere business.”

Most importantly, the user experience was excellent. “With Cato, our users don’t even know they’re connected to a network backbone — and they shouldn’t have to. They just know they can access all their applications and services seamlessly, says Sobrinho.” The support experience has also been positive. “We’re very happy with the service levels we’ve been getting Cato,” he says. “We don’t have to tie up IT people to handle a maintenance outage or a hardware or software upgrade to enhance uptime. We spend a lot less time on network administration.”

Perhaps that greatest benefit: PlayPower can make business decisions without worrying about network limitations. Says Sobrinho, “With Cato, we can tap the right location to provide the right service based on business need, not some artificial network constraint such as bandwidth.”

Alfred Sobrinho,
Global Vice President and Head of Information Technology PlayPower