Centara strengthens network with Aruba solution, equip workers with connected devices and moves entire backend system to the cloud as it transforms to cater to today’s digital-savvy guests

Centara Hotels & Resorts, a business under the Central Group, is a leading hospitality management provider in Thailand with an expanding portfolio of properties around the world. Centara, which is dedicated to providing exceptional service in unique and sophisticated environments, embarked on a business and digital transformation journey that began with the modernization of its operation and processes.

ENGAGING HOTEL GUESTS IN THE MOBILE AGE

The hospitality and tourism industry in Thailand has gone through significant changes in recent years. Besides a healthy flow of tourists from China due to the fast-growing economy there, tourists from across Asia is also increasing. In 2017, tourist from South Asia grew by more than 16 percent from 1.52 million in 2016 to 1.77 million in 2017.

The trend translates to Centara, and others in the hospitality industry, having to cater to a new customer profile. Adrian Hardwick-Jones, Vice President Design and Technical Services, Centara Hotels & Resorts, elaborated: “Today, 80 percent of Centara’s guests come from Asia while we used to see more Caucasians from the West 10 years ago. Also, guests these days come with their own digital devices. They probably get more content on their devices than from hotel TVs.”

Adrian Hardwick-Jones,
Vice President Design and Technical Services, Centara Hotels & Resorts

REQUIREMENTS

- Enhanced network foundation for the move to cloud computing
- Improved and more stable connectivity for better guest experience
- Data and network security to better protect customer and financial information
- Visibility and centralized management of network

SOLUTION

- Aruba AirWave Network Management System
- Aruba 7200 Wireless Controller
- Aruba Switches including the 5406R, 2930F and 2530 series
- Aruba OfficeConnect solutions including 1950 and 1920S switch series (for the smaller properties)
- Aruba 11ac wave 2 Access Points including the 325 and 345
- Aruba In-Room 11ac Access Points including the 203H and 205H

BENEFITS

- Smart connectivity that allows for personalized experience for guests with own mobile devices
- Digital workplace that supports connected mobile tools for frontline and housekeeping staff
- Easier management of the entire network on one platform
- Low total cost of ownership with Aruba’s lifetime warranty

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The digital transformation at Centara is a strategic move by the hotel and resort business to modernize the way it engages with hotel guests. Centara planned to bring its entire operation to the digital age and this includes migrating its entire backend system to a centralized integrated platform on the cloud.

“We wanted to engage our guests differently starting from adding Asian languages to shampoo bottles in the bathrooms to placing smart TVs that greet our guests in their own languages based on their nationality. These TVs also communicate with their own connected devices so that they can watch the content of their choice,” he added.

Consequently, Centara needed to modernize the network infrastructure across all 40 of its properties. The is crucial on the one hand to deliver a positive guest experience, and on the other, to ensure that staff has quick and secure access the company’s new cloud-based system while on property.

Additionally, the plan also included transforming the hotels into smart digital workplaces where staff are empowered with mobile devices designed to help them be more effective at their work and free up frontline staff from their desks to better engage with guests.

**THE NETWORK AS A STRATEGIC BUSINESS ENabler**

Centara set out to look for a network technology partner that can best support its transformation to cloud and mobile – an era where guests demand to remain connected at every corner of the hotel property and staff need to have access to cloud-based business applications at high speeds and reliable stability.

The Centara team decided on Aruba after a thorough evaluation process. Aruba’s solution stood out from the competition in at the proof of concept stage, especially in its superior performance, stability, and scalability.

Adrian commented: “We wanted a new network that can support 4G, and eventually 5G, coverage. A network that can ensure that all the business components within our hotels can be talking to each other. Guest interface is important in our business, but what is even more critical is the integration behind the scene and this is where we need it to be smart in our new business model.”

Aruba’s team was invited to participate in Centara’s IT planning, and it was decided that one of the first things to do is to set up a robust Wi-Fi network. This included the deployment of an Aruba AirWave Network Management...
System and a network solution that offered unmatched connectivity across the properties.

Currently, Centara’s newly adopted smart digital workplace has dramatically and positively transformed its operation. Some key improvements include:

- **Cloud-based business environment** – Centara’s cloud strategy means that it now has a standardized, shared service model with data stored and accessed from a centralized integrated system. This translates to a single platform where management has visibility into the entire operation, as well as a revenue management system that links all properties.

  Aruba’s high-performance and secure Wi-Fi infrastructure forms the backbone to this strategy as it supports the growing number of mobile devices that both guests and staff are using on hotel premises.

  Adrian said: “With the centralized integrated system, we are managing 8,000 rooms across all the properties and not 40 different hotels from planning to reporting. For instance, each item on a room service menu can now be identified with a single code and this allows management to see how the item is selling across all the properties.”

- **All round visibility into network** – Centara’s IT team now gets clear visibility into the network using Aruba AirWave Network Management system. The tool allows the team to actively monitor the performance of the entire network, see client behavior and identify problems before there are disruptions to connectivity and application quality.

- **Network-enabled mobile staff** – Many of Centara’s staff are now equipped with smart phones and tablets that allow them to stay connected to the company’s network and access business applications on the go. For instance,…

  - **Check-in guests using iPad** – Front desk staff can use an iPad to help guests check in. This is helpful for moving crowds away from the front desk during peak period as the check-in process can be done at the room or another location. More importantly, it helps to break down the barrier between guests and staff, as staff no longer need to be seated behind a desk when they are welcoming guests.

- **Housekeeping with smart phone apps** – Housekeeping staff can now be alerted through an app on their smartphones when guests check out of their rooms or when a certain room needs tidying. This brings dramatic improvement operationally as rooms can be cleaned and prepared for the next guest in a shorter time.

- **Improved cybersecurity and data privacy** – Centara has also put in place measures to protect the data that is now stored in its centralized integrated system. Measures include safeguarding access through the Internet and network, as well as the proper use of passwords and granting only specific staff access to the data. The team has also looked into safeguarding data privacy, especially in the use of and sharing of customer data, to ensure GDPR compliance.

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**LEAPFROGGING THE COMPETITION IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

Centara’s cloud-based digital transformation has allowed it to bring sweeping changes to its operation, processes and systems across its properties. Deploying a smart digital workplace has especially allowed it to take advantage of technology trends like Internet of Things (IoT) and proliferation of mobile devices along with changes in work and guest preferences.
According to Adrian, Centara has been able to free up hundreds of staff from administrative duties and menial tasks through technology adoption. For many of the staff, this means opportunities to upgrade their skills or reskilling for other roles.

Furthermore, with a centralized system, staff training can now be conducted in clusters. This means training for 18 to 20 staff at once compared to six to eight staff on one property at a time previously. This cut speed of roll-out tremendously, and reduced training costs by almost 70 percent.

Next phase in Centara’s plan is to strengthen its network security. Centara’s team is now working with Aruba to put in place security solutions that will offer better access control and enhance visibility over all the wired and wireless devices connecting to the network. Centara is also planning to tap on Aruba’s location-based technology to better engage guests and staff on property. Possibilities include helping guests with wayfinding around properties, offering proximity campaign information and using data analytics to further enhance guest experiences.