

Success Story



Company
Assura

Sector
Healthcare

Number of locations
19

Customer since
2005

Services in use
- Connect LAN
- Connect Internet
- Connect IP-PBX
- GigaClass Services

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Better services at a lower cost

Assura is part of the leading group of the ten largest health insurance companies in Switzerland. The independent company, which this year celebrates its 30th anniversary, has more than 400,000 policy holders and is fighting against the cost explosion in healthcare with innovative services. Assura is also putting its faith in innovative solutions in the field of IT. Mirko Minini, Head of the IT department, outlines the cornerstones of his strategy for success in this interview.

Mr Minini, in view of the cost explosion in healthcare, Assura has always backed long-term premium stability. How does IT contribute to the ability of your company to control costs and offer its customers attractive premiums?

Assura is indeed one of the health insurance companies whose general costs are amongst the lowest in Switzerland. The company's IT system is definitely one of the factors that contribute to this. Assura has always attached importance to the performance and stability of its systems and applications. This means a sustainable reduction in costs for IT development and maintenance and also, therefore, in operating costs.

Furthermore, Assura has developed all its specialist applications internally, meaning that it can be largely independent. The systems can therefore be quickly adapted to market developments, such as new insurance products or changes in the law. The fact that the company has in-house IT expertise is a significant factor in keeping down costs.

As part of a joint venture Assura shares its IT services with a good 20 independent companies. How was this decision reached and how is your IT organised?

Ever since the company was formed in 1978, Assura has always had an in-house IT department. With the rapid growth of the company, the size of this department has also increased year by year. For reasons of efficiency, and in order to generate synergies, it was decided at the end of 2005 to form a service company, Figeas SA. The intention was that, with 22 companies and foundations at 19 locations, several synergies, including the IT infrastructure, should be used. Apart from IT, Figeas SA also provides central services in other fields such as



upc cablecom
business

Profile

Mirko Minini, 45, is Head of the IT department at Figeas SA, the company that manages, amongst others, the entire IT section of Assura. Minini has spent his entire working life at Assura, after starting his career there in 1980. Since 1994 he has been Manager of the IT department and is responsible for the organisation and business operations of the group's IT section. Prior to that he worked for a few years in operating and in software development. Since 2003 he has been a member of the management board. In January 2007 he became IT Manager at Figeas SA, when it commenced its operations.



“ With upc cablecom we probably now have the largest VoIP network in French-speaking Switzerland and one of the largest in the whole of Switzerland. ”

marketing, human resources and finances. Figeas SA started operations as an independent company in January 2007. With 600 employees at 13 sites, Assura is and remains Figeas SA's most important “customer” in the whole of Switzerland.

What were the consequences of this new structure?

An organisation of this type does, of course, mean a significantly greater IT requirement and a considerable increase in the load on the network. At the same time restructuring makes it possible for us to improve the quality of our services still further. However, we do require a higher network performance for this. Against this background, in 2006 we revised our IT infrastructure and the network. In addition the contracts with our suppliers at the time also ran out. This provided us with the opportunity to redefine our requirements and to launch an invitation to tender. The aim was to find a partner who could best meet our increased demands.

What were your requirements with regard to the network infrastructure?

We needed higher transmission speeds and a solution that could be upgraded and adapted to our rapid growth. Higher transmission speeds should enable us to improve our specialist applications, which are centralised on a server in Pully and are provided to the 13 Assura branches. We also wanted to integrate VoIP into our IT network.

In view of the critical character of our network for data, telephony and Internet access, maximum availability and security were of central importance for us. We therefore wanted to have a single contact who is responsible for the entire solution and who guarantees maximum availability. We no longer wanted to be dependent on several partners who blame one another when problems arise. And the price of the solution was, of course, also taken into consideration.

Assura and Figeas

Assura was formed in 1978 with the aim of realizing an alternative, innovative vision of a health insurance company. The company has now grown to become the seventh largest health insurance company in Switzerland with over 400,000 policy holders. Every year it is again ranked as one of the most affordable health insurance companies. Assura supports the individual responsibility of its policy holders in order to restrict health costs. The company popularised revolutionary concepts such as optional deductibles and the abolition of pharmacy slips. Assura is an independent company that employs 600 staff at 13 sites throughout Switzerland.

Since 2007 Assura has delegated the management of IT to Figeas SA, a service company that was formed at the end of 2005. In addition to Assura, Figeas also manages the entire IT services of 22 companies and foundations at 19 sites. Through the central grouping of the corresponding resources of the different partner companies, Figeas is able to achieve economies of scale. Figeas provides centralised services in the fields of IT, human resources, finance, logistics, statistics and marketing.

Infos: www.assura.ch, www.figeas.ch

“upc cablecom has kept all its promises. That was by no means a matter of course given the scale of the project and the deadlines involved.”

What does the solution that you implemented look like now?

We decided on a fibre optic network in order to ensure the high data rate that we need. The majority of our sites are now connected to our data center via fibre optics and other sites will shortly follow suit.

Our data center is replicated at a site in the Lausanne area. The two data centers are directly linked via a Gigabit network which forms a fully redundant loop. All lines in the network that lead to the branches are similarly split. We chose SLA Gold as it guarantees round-the-clock availability. Our data center hosts the applications and data of the 22 companies that we manage. The fibre optic network guarantees data transmission, Internet traffic and VoIP. This infrastructure is highly efficient and easily scalable.



What prompted you to decide on upc cablecom as the exclusive provider of this solution?

We wanted a single partner, not several. That is why in the invitation to tender for the project we were seeking a provider with its own nationwide fibre optic network. In Switzerland there are only two operators with their own core networks with entry points throughout Switzerland. One of these is upc cablecom.

For a variety of reasons we were looking for an alternative to the traditional provider. The offer from upc cablecom appealed to us straight away both from the technical perspective and with regard to customer relations. It was also the most attractive offer with regard to price, even though that was not the main criterion for us. upc cablecom offered us better services at a lower price than the competition. So the decision to opt for upc cablecom was made quickly as it was this company that best responded to our requirements.

Why did you opt for a fibre optic network?

Only optical fibre cables can offer the bandwidth and flexibility we need. With optical fibre cables we can connect our sites, including our data centers, with the required speed of 2 to 120 Mbit/s. Thanks to these transmission speeds we have been able to improve our specialist applications still further and offer users a greater degree of interactivity.



For example, all documents are scanned and stored centrally. The branches can now access these image data directly and respond to enquiries from customers immediately. In addition, we were able with upc cablecom's technology to change our fixed network telephony to Internet telephony.

What are the advantages of the VoIP solution from upc cablecom?

With 850 users and more than 40,000 external calls from customers per week our telephony is a really critical factor. With upc cablecom we probably have the largest VoIP network in French-speaking Switzerland and one of the largest in the whole of Switzerland.

VoIP is a very sensitive technology: the slightest delay in signal transmission leads to errors in communication. Maximum reliability of the infrastructure is therefore exceptionally important. In this upc cablecom was offering us a unique, extremely high-quality solution for VoIP that makes it possible to incorporate the voice into the data stream and to guarantee prioritised transmission of the voice packages in the network. So the quality of communication virtually corresponds to that of classic telephony. In addition, VoIP offers very great price benefits. All internal calls are free of charge.

VoIP for 19 sites and 850 users



Pierre-Frédéric Diserens, Telephony Manager, Figeas SA:

"We had already been planning for a long time to change to VoIP, but we were restricted by the capacity of our old network. We had already started using the technology between two main sites in 2001. But thanks to the new fibre optic network from upc cablecom all 19 sites in Switzerland have now switched to VoIP - with all the benefits with regard to cost and the technical possibilities provided by this solution. With 850 users and more than 40,000 external calls from customers per week our telephony is a really critical factor. upc cablecom offered us a unique solution for VoIP with extremely high quality and we are very pleased with it."

What was upc cablecom's task when working out a network solution to meet your needs?

upc cablecom gave us very useful information with regard to the solutions available and supported us throughout the entire project. In the initial phase, our contacts always suggested several alternatives with varying costs and options. At the very start they understood our requirements and in particular our need for further development. Our contacts understood how to listen and so always suggested solutions that were appropriate to our particular conditions. On every occasion we were able to select the options that we needed without then finding ourselves confronted with an over- or under-dimensioned infrastructure.

How do you rate your cooperation with upc cablecom in general terms?

upc cablecom has kept all its promises. This was not a matter of course with a migration of this scale and the very short deadlines required. The greater part of the project was completed within three months and the total duration was six months. Dealings with our contacts at upc cablecom were excellent. A genuine partnership has evolved between the two companies.

How would you sum up the situation ten months after the implementation of this new network solution?

The network has been proven to meet our expectations. We are very pleased about this. We have not had any problems at all with regard to availability or transmission speed. There were a few problems at the start with VoIP. These were mainly attributable to the integration of the different technologies into the telephony network. Fax in particular was affected by this. However, upc cablecom reacted very professionally and immediately installed an adequate solution. Our final assessment is very positive.

Interview: Grégoire Baillod, freelance journalist, Geneva
Photos: Frank Mentha, photographer, Geneva

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