Agility in motion:
How a commitment to the cloud facilitated remote access for DB Schenker’s global workforce
Company Background

Company: DB Schenker
Sector: Logistics
Drivers: Markus Sontheimer, Gerold Nagel
Roles: CIO/CDO Member of the Board of Management, SVP of Global Infrastructure Services
Revenue: USD$18.5B
Employees: 76,000
Countries: 80
Locations: 1400

Company IT Footprint

Global logistics and freight-forwarding company DB Schenker provides contract shipping services over land, sea, and air. Its IT infrastructure team manages systems and solutions for its 76,000+ employee workforce in more than 1400 locations around the globe.

When the coronavirus outbreak began, multinational logistics company DB Schenker had to address an immediate concern: How do you enable the majority of your workforce to work remotely and keep them safe while ensuring business continuity? Fortunately for DB Schenker, the company had set the stage for its own business continuity years earlier.

“Global” operations in every sense of the word

Based out of Essen, Germany, DB Schenker is one of the world’s leading logistics and freight-forwarding companies, providing contracted transport services over land, sea, and air. Its operations span more than 80 countries, and it employs more than 76,000 workers in 1400+ locations.

Markus Sontheimer, DB Schenker’s CIO/CDO Member of the Board of Management, describes the worldwide nature of DB Schenker’s business operations this way: “We have to cross borders. We have to ship from A to B, no matter what country it is, and no matter what it costs.”

Committing to the cloud

Sontheimer had begun initiatives across DB Schenker to migrate workflows, resources, and applications to the cloud. The effort was partly to reduce infrastructure expense, but also to ease management and administrative complexity.

DB Schenker’s secure cloud transformation began in 2017, when the company invested in Zscaler Internet Access (ZIA) to secure local internet breakouts for its employees’ internet egress. It was part of a larger program launch within DB Schenker called “Global Workplace Management,” prioritizing cloud-based solutions and SaaS use.

“We started what we call ‘server-free branches,’” explains Sontheimer, “basically, cloud-first
operations: authentication in the cloud, software distribution in the cloud, nothing on-premise anymore. And with [Microsoft 365], all our data is in the cloud, accessible at any time, from anywhere."

Starting in 2018, the next cloud-migration objective was to move DB Schenker away from its legacy network architecture. The IT team focused on two areas: First, as Sontheimer recalls, “We switched to a hybrid network, with internet connections all over the place, and Zscaler for bandwidth control.”

The second task was to standardize on a software-based, global unified communications (UC) telephony platform: “No desk phones in the office and hardly any hardware,” notes Sontheimer.

The constructive transition to “Global Workplace Management” — GWM for short — built the foundation for DB Schenker’s successful cloud transformation. But it represented only the beginning of what would become the most agile operational pivot in company history.

An interruption in Chinese operations signals a broader global disruption

In January 2020, the coronavirus hit, immediately impacting DB Schenker’s Chinese operations. The outbreak’s business repercussions started during the Lunar New Year holidays, while many China-based DB Schenker employees were on vacation. That simple circumstance bought DB Schenker a little bit of time to figure out how to enable immediate remote access for its affected workers.

DB Schenker SVP of Global Infrastructure Services Gerold Nagel and his team moved quickly — Given what was happening in China, they recognized the extent of the threat COVID-19 posed to global business operations. To begin, Nagel assessed the legacy network hardware serving his Chinese colleagues and remote DB Schenker employees around the world. And the assessment wasn’t positive.

“We had some very specific challenges we had to face in China,” explains Nagel. “We had a small, dedicated VPN setup.” Worldwide, DB Schenker allowed users to connect through VPN concentrators in four locations. Nagel quickly determined that sticking with DB Schenker’s VPN hardware would constrain the company’s ability to ramp up remote access for home-based workers. “We had a traditional VPN,” says Nagel, “but it was very limited in how many concurrent users there could be.” Scaling the VPN architecture would “require hardware, setup, ordering” and would mean “we wouldn’t be able to do anything on time.”

Nagel and team considered alternatives. They started with the cloud, and Zscaler Private Access (ZPA).

“The disruption led us right away to ZPA,” explains Nagel, a solution that would allow “users to log on remotely and access applications with high scalability and ease of use.”

In early February, Nagel and team ran a successful four-day ZPA pilot test phase, and then raced to deploy it for affected employees: When employees began returning from holiday travel, DB Schenker’s IT infrastructure team was ready to put ZPA in production. Over two-and-a-half hectic weeks, DB Schenker rolled out ZPA, first for its employees in China, then to the broader workforce.

Nagel saw an immediate impact: that there was no impact to business continuity.

“ZPA is what we implemented,” says Nagel, “and that enabled us to very quickly ramp up 8,000 users in our Asia/Pacific region, working from home, accessing everything in the cloud, accessing everything that is in our own premises, all of our own applications.”
ZPA contributed to Nagel and team’s success in sustaining DB Schenker business continuity. To Nagel, having the GWM already in place “was one of the key principles that helped us.” But it was a solid communication plan that helped guide DB Schenker through the crisis.

Even in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, Nagel recognized the importance of clear, unambiguous communication. Says Nagel, “We had to tell employees very basic things like ‘Take your laptop home! Don’t leave it in the office. You might not get the chance to return to get it.’”

Nagel identifies the six components of DB Schenker’s crisis communications plan: establishing a task force, leveraging collaboration tools (in DB Schenker’s case, Microsoft Teams), performing daily status checks, ensuring accountability with detailed task-tracking, building (and using) communication channels, and ensuring continuous improvement with shared lessons learned.

Remote access, no more VPNs, and a new competitive advantage

Adapting to an entire workforce needing to work remotely is an admittedly extreme example of DB Schenker’s new operational agility. Sontheimer and Nagel both credit ZPA for that, and for what they hope will be a competitive advantage in the future.

“ZPA is very easy to use,” Sontheimer explains. “The volume of people can grow. You don’t have the limitations of a VPN. Zscaler Private Access was the key enabler for DB Schenker to support our business continuity plans. And to keep our business ahead of our competitors in the market.”
The feedback from affected employees has been more than positive, notes Son-theimer: “They don’t want to go back to a traditional VPN connection anymore. And that’s something I can guarantee.”

In the end, ZPA gives DB Schenker a direct-connection capability it didn’t have before. In this case, it delivered that value under crisis circumstances. Nagel remains appreciative. “This is practical, not theoretical,” he says. “It’s actually really working! Easy to use and also very quick to ramp up. I must encourage enterprise IT leads: Look into ZPA if you have to get your workforce working from home.”

About Zscaler

Zscaler was founded in 2007 on a simple but powerful concept: As applications move to the cloud, security needs to move there as well. Today, we are helping thousands of global organizations transform into cloud-enabled operations.