

Network solves architects' time zone challenges

Partners were faced with tight deadlines

By RUTH BAUM BIGUS
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■ **The company:** Crawford Architects specializes in mixed-use development for hotels, commercial, retail and office building projects throughout the United States and Australia.

The firm also does work in the sports facilities area often involving public-private partnerships. The firm's design projects include Branson Landing in Branson, Mo., the Law Building at 12th Street and Grand Boulevard in Kansas City, and the University of Northern Iowa's arena. Crawford is also doing the redesign work for the Minnesota Vikings' new stadium and a study for the renovation of Fenway Park in Boston.

■ **Telephone:** (816) 421-2640.

■ **Address:** 1901 Main St., Suite 200, Kansas City. The home office of the firm is in Sydney.

■ **Web site:** www.crawford.com.au.

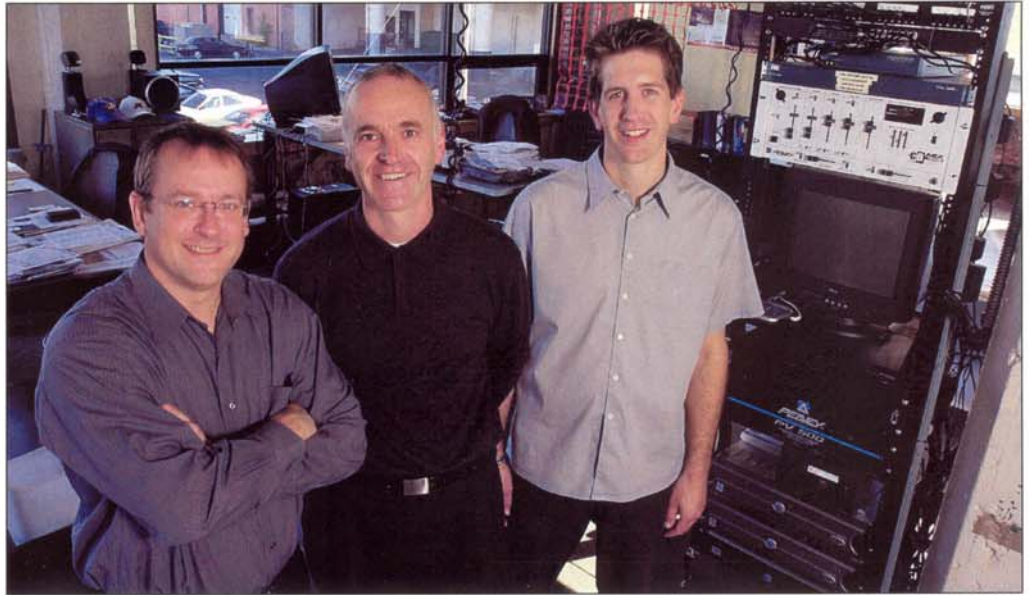
■ **Ownership, top management:** Five partners own the firm; three of the partners are in Kansas City – Stacey Jones, David Murphy and Tom Proebstle.

■ **Employees:** There are five employees in the Kansas City office, of which three are architects.

■ **Challenge:** How to meet clients' needs with time zone difference from home office.

■ **Background:** Crawford Architects has been in business for about 20 years. In the past few years, Murphy and Proebstle – who were with another architectural firm specializing in sports facilities – found themselves working with Jones at Crawford on several projects. Among the projects the trio worked on was the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta. A year ago, Jones said Crawford landed the Branson Convention Center project but needed a way to service the client from the states. The solution was Murphy and Proebstle branching out on their own, joining the Crawford firm and opening a Kansas City branch office with the three architects.

The trio was able to use the resources of additional architects in the home office back in Sydney. At the same time, the Kansas City office was challenged with meeting tight deadlines while facing a 17-hour time difference to get drawings back



SHANE KEYSER / THE STAR

A high-speed conferencing network helped the local office of Crawford Architects overcome the 17-hour time difference with the home office in Sydney, Australia. David Murphy (from left), Stacey Jones and Tom Proebstle are three of the five partners.

and forth from the home office in Sydney. Previously, documents in the Kansas City office were bundled together and sent by e-mail, taking hours to "unbundle" them for staff in Australia to work on. For the partners, time is money, and they needed to speed up the process while using the additional resources.

■ **Action:** The Kansas City partners sat down to discuss how they could combine the two practices so they appeared to operate as one. They came up with the idea of creating a virtual private network to communicate to the office back in Sydney.

"It would allow us to log on in real time and work on documents in either office," Murphy said.

Knowing they needed high-speed Internet access, the partners began interviewing outside consultants to build the network for them, which proved challenging in itself.

"We found people who had Internet background but not architectural background to know what we needed," Murphy said.

They finally settled on an expert who had some understanding of both worlds, designing the network with additional equipment. The network was put into place in about a month.

"All the documents are stored in Kansas City, but Sydney looks at them live," Jones said.

The Kansas City office is also equipped

with digital voice capabilities and video conferencing as well as a special line in each office for the system.

"At about 6 p.m. here it is the start of the workday in Sydney so we can catch them, and that's when we do our videoconferencing," Murphy said.

■ **Results:** Putting the network in place is helping Crawford to meet its clients without increasing costs to meet employee overhead, the partners said.

"By having two shifts per day between the two offices, we're not working anyone overtime and we are able to provide services like a 40-person firm," Jones said.

Proebstle said the network allowed Crawford to function as a 24/7 operation. "We are able to get a six-month process down to two months," Proebstle said. "And by talking digitally over the Internet through the network to Sydney, we don't incur additional costs."

Murphy said the system allowed the firm to run "like one office with an ocean between us."

"We can do things quickly, more efficiently and more profitably," he said. "I'm able to make money in my sleep."

The network has also eliminated the need for some travel between the two offices, which saves money. Those savings, said Jones, are put to good use. "We dedicate savings to make sure that our face-to-face relationships are maintained," Jones said.