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Garry Griffin
Group Manager, Information Systems

Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service Choose FirePass SSL VPN to Reduce Operational Costs and Improve Connectivity

Industry:
Emergency Service

Challenges:
• 21 fixed and numerous remote locations required reliable data access
• High IPSec VPN costs and support calls

Solution:
FirePass SSL VPN

Benefits:
• Reduced remote user support calls by 90%.
• Seamlessly integrates with existing IPSEC network to allow smooth migration.
• Allows new users to be quickly added while maintaining highest levels of security.

Overview
Fighting fires is only part of the work of the present day fire service. Cutting people out of wrecked vehicles in road accidents, dealing with chemical spills and rescuing trapped animals are an increasing proportion of the duties of the Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service.

Changing political and environmental conditions mean that the service also needs to be ready to tackle major incidents such as terrorist attacks, serious transport accidents and natural disasters.

The need for around the clock remote connectivity to key back office systems is increasingly important for the 650 staff based at 21 fixed and numerous remote locations. With the launch of F5's FirePass, the service identified an innovative method of reducing its technical support overhead while improving access for remote workers.

Challenge
Since it was all brought under one roof in 1970, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service's (Bucks Fire) control room has handled an estimated 600,000 calls and currently receives an average of more than 400 a week.

Fire Control deploys the service's 554 firefighters and 42 specialist fire and rescue vehicles to a variety of emergency incidents – mainly fires and road accidents – in response to 999 calls. The number of incidents has averaged about 10,000 a year for the past 10 years – double the annual number 20 years ago.

In April 2005, the service will consolidate its Aylesbury headquarters to a new purpose-built site in Stocklake. Ahead of this move, senior IT managers decided that a better method of remote access would be needed.

"We had considered a better alternative to our IPSEC-based remote access solution for some time but it was the launch of FirePass that first sparked our interest," explains Garry Griffin, Group Manager – Information Systems at Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service.

"We had been contacted by our IT solutions provider about a new technology that would potentially allow us to improve our remote connectivity while reducing the common technical support problems associated with IPSEC."

Before approving a pilot scheme, Garry reviewed a number of independent evaluations of SSL VPN technology and contacted a

number of vendors to assess the viability of the FirePass product.

As an organization, Bucks Fire is increasingly reliant on its IT system for activities such as onsite safety training, presentations, procurement and logistical information systems.

"With our IPSEC based remote access solution there would always be a number of complex support issues each month – especially as some of our users often needed to log-on from previously unvisited locations or with personal laptops or PC's."

"As a 24/7 organisation, reducing our support costs while maintaining a mission critical service is our main priority and on paper FirePass looked like a perfect solution," Garry adds.

Solution

In early October, Garry contacted IT solution provider Hytec to setup an initial pilot to test the feasibility of a wider roll out to 10 remote workers.

The pilot project utilised a FirePass 1000, based at Bucks Fire HQ in Aylesbury, to deliver email, files and more general office systems to 10 remote test users.

FirePass was run alongside the existing IPSEC based solution for comparison. "FirePass worked flawlessly with our remote users and much better than our existing systems. Our old IPSEC solution worked fine for the fixed locations but was very flaky from remote sites. The users that moved to FirePass had no connectivity or performance problems."

FirePass is also assisting the service in meeting its Electronic Service Delivery targets. Brigades and fire authorities are part of the ongoing government initiative that specifies that all services that can be electronically delivered, should be. The fire brigade is also bound by Best Value Performance Indicator 157, which applied to the fire service from 2003.

Following the successful trial, Bucks Fire made FirePass access available to another fifty staff members.

Garry has also evaluated the impact of FirePass on support. "The number of technical support calls related from remote users has fallen dramatically since we introduced FirePass and users are reporting no performance issues compared to the old system."

FirePass provides a secure SSL based remote connection and only requires clients with a web browser and internet connectivity. The system automatically checks the integrity of the user device and authenticates the user before allowing access to end-to-end SSL encrypted data. After the user disconnects, FirePass cleans up any confidential information left on the client device.

"Over the last three months, it has reduced support calls from remote users by about 90% which equates to about a 3 days a month savings which is a lot for our small IT department," Garry adds.

The benefits for the IT department include a rapid setup time for new users which requires just a few minutes and can be performed remotely. Also, the lack of a software client on the user device allows remote access using more types of hardware such as Macintosh, Linux and PDA's – which was previously a complex procedure.

"We are very pleased with both FirePass and the assistance and training we received from Hytec and we are now looking at providing remote users access to more back office and mission critical systems," Garry concludes.