



Home working is no longer an IT Issue for North Wiltshire District Council

An interview with David Lovelock – ICT Strategy and E-government Officer for North Wiltshire District Council

The Challenge

When the revenues department at North Wiltshire District Council bid for funds to set up a flexible working project, they were delighted when the funds arrived to enable their ICT department to pioneer a secure remote working scheme for their workers. The main objective was to find a way to retain and recruit benefit assessors, a job which is known to be very pressurized and stressful. Many officers, who may have gone on maternity leave, were not returning back into the job because of the stress levels, commuting issues and wanting more of a work/life balance. North Wiltshire therefore recognized the advantages of being able to offer flexible working through secure home working.

The ICT department did not feel that the current IPSEC client-based VPN technology was suitable for home worker usage due to its deployment, overhead and more complex interface. David Lovelock, the ICT Strategy and e-Government Officer at North Wiltshire District, looked to Nviron Limited for recommendations on how to solve this problem. Nviron has a relationship with North Wiltshire District Council which spans over ten years and has implemented a number of key projects including the StoneGate high availability firewall to protect the

“Wiltshire and Swindon Partnership” Web service and an on-going project to implement Windows 2003 with Active Directory. Nviron recommended the Netilla SSL VPN from AEP Networks solution to provide “clientless working” and the solution was benchmarked against a similar solution from a competitive SSL VPN for a two week period.

The Solution

“After two weeks the Netilla Security Platform from AEP came out on top due to its performance, simple set up and user friendly interface. This coupled with its use of thin client technology made it a natural option for North Wiltshire,” said David Lovelock.

One of the objectives apart from finding a user friendly way of offering home working, was the option to supply Voice over IP through the SSL VPN, which the District Council firmly believe is the way forward as a means of saving money and providing greater flexibility. Calls can seamlessly be diverted to a person’s home without anyone knowing where they are.

Now that North Wiltshire District Council has AEP’s Netilla SSL VPN in place, their home workers are its biggest fans. Karen, one of the first benefit assessors to use the Netilla appliance from home four days a week, manages to save an hour and a half commute a day, she is far happier working from home, much less stressed and what’s more surprising, the Council have found that her productivity has gone up by 20%! By not commuting to work everyday, Karen has found the perfect work/life balance as well as reaping back three

months every year, as this was the amount of time she was wasting driving to and from work.

At first the ICT department were pretty cynical about the amount of time it would take to manage deploying an SSL VPN for home working, and they were mainly worried about the amount of hand-holding they would have to do, especially after their experience with 50 councillors who have been using dial-up for the last two years to get at their work remotely.

David Lovelock said "The biggest advantage and the nicest surprise is that Netilla's SSL VPN does not require any IT support. It's one of the few products we have ever used that does exactly what it says on the box - we've been blown away by its ease of use."

David has found that users need very little training, in-fact, they provide just 30 minutes hands-on training and then let the user play around with the software for half a day in the office before they get to use it from home. Because it has the same look and feel as their computer in the office, the end-user feels very confident and familiar with all their applications and there is very little technical support required. Another major benefit has been that a user can be set-up and using the SSL VPN within minutes. It doesn't matter whether you are setting up the system in the office or home, it requires no extra build as it uses the same configuration.

A spin-off which North Wiltshire District Council had not anticipated and has proved to be invaluable is that they are now using it to provide their suppliers

with access to their network. They currently have 18 different systems being supported by external suppliers and this was causing a number of problems such as dial-back and licensing problems. Recently they had a problem with their server which was being managed by a software company in Canada, within 10 minutes they were able to give their supplier access through Netilla and the problem was resolved within minutes, rather than hours. Dave said "By providing suppliers with access to our network through the Netilla SSL VPN, it has revolutionized the way we all work together. They love it as it is quick to install, and you can fix problems straight away. It has certainly changed the way we look at support. The suppliers love it to because it does not intervene with their own policies and security procedures as they are still going through their own firewalls etc."

"AEP has revolutionized our working lives. Workers now access their email, financial reporting systems and other applications in a secure environment."

David Lovelock
Strategy and E-government Officer

This is where SSL VPNs have a great advantage over traditional IPsec VPNs. Previously North Wiltshire had a problem with the information not getting through the corporate firewall, plus they were relying on a great deal of effort and support. The big plus about SSL VPNs is that they use standard http and SSL ports providing ease of use and flexibility as well as strong security.

North Wiltshire now comply with the Employment Act 2002 and its two associated regulations, which have given mothers and fathers the right to request to work flexibly from the 6th April 2003. The legislation virtually

imposes a legal requirement for employers to implement the technology and facilitate the option of home working under the “flexible working act”.

Dave concludes, “Home or remote working is no longer an IT issue, it’s simple to set up and once it’s up and running needs no IT support, the real issue to home working is cultural. Netilla makes working from home the same as if you are working from the office, you’ve got your PC, modem router and a firewall in a box, the security is the same as in the corporate environment, it’s pretty idiot proof and the 21st Century way of working.”

About AEP Networks

AEP Networks, the specialist in network and application access security, delivers infrastructure security solutions that are easy to use and manage while offering exceptional value and mission-critical reliability. AEP Networks was formed as a result of the merger between AEP Systems Ltd and Netilla Networks Inc. in 2004. The company provides a full range of innovative secure networking and application access products to meet the most demanding requirements of public-sector and commercial customers. A privately held company backed by leading technology investors, AEP Networks is based in Somerset, N.J., with European headquarters in London.

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