Desktop Virtualization

Case Study

West Midlands Fire Service

Extinguishing slow, inflexible and costly desktops

At the second largest fire and rescue service in England, Cutter Group has implemented a virtual desktop infrastructure across 38 fire stations. Now firefighters and support staff have faster, more flexible access to the IT services they need to help them keep the 2.8 million people in the West Midlands safe.

Challenges Faced

For modern fire and rescue services, fast and reliable desktop computers are as important as fast and reliable fire engines. Firefighters and support staff use a variety of IT applications every day to plan emergency responses, implement community fire safety schemes and undertake vital training, as well as produce reports immediately after incidents occur.

Within the West Midlands Fire Service, more than 18,000 employees, including 1,200 firefighters, used PCs at 38 fire stations across the region. These users relied on a variety of web-based solutions, including Microsoft Office 365, but application performance was very slow. Furthermore, it typically took users 20 to 30 minutes to log onto the PCs. Once connected, users were then reluctant to log out again, which prevented their colleagues from using the PCs and resulted in an inefficient use of IT resources.

Cutter made all the difference by:

- Driving the entire VDI deployment for 38 sites
- Leveraging its strong experience of Citrix VDI solutions
- Sharing its knowledge with employees in hands-on training
- Providing a highly responsive 24/7 support service

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Simon Bentley
IT Infrastructure Team Leader, West Midlands Fire Service

Services Provided

Cutter Group worked with West Midlands Fire Service to transform the organisation's desktop IT services by implementing a virtualized desktop infrastructure (VDI) for all 38 fire stations. "VDI is very complex and we didn't have the skills to undertake this project by ourselves," says Simon Bentley, IT Infrastructure Team Leader at West Midlands Fire Service. "Cutter Group took care of the whole VDI deployment for us. All of the company's consultants are very knowledgeable about VDI and know exactly what they are talking about. I would totally recommend them."

Cutter Group installed Citrix XenDesktop and a Citrix NetScaler Application Delivery Controller, running on Nutanix Acropolis hyper-converged infrastructure. It then created the organisation's first desktop image to deliver the applications that users need, devised scripts to improve print performance and ran a pilot to test the new system thoroughly before go-live.

During the course of the project, Cutter Group provided hands-on, on-site training for IT staff at the headquarters of West Midlands Fire Service, to give them the skills and confidence to manage the new IT infrastructure on a day-to-day basis. "Cutter Group consultants have implemented Citrix VDI solutions lots of times, for many different companies, and we were able to learn from their experience," Bentley says.

Cutter Group continues to provide assistance to West Midlands Fire Service through an ongoing contract for 24/7 technical support. "Cutter's support is second to none," Bentley says. "We had a problem with load balancing on a node on a Friday afternoon, and Cutter responded within ten minutes."

Results Achieved

The VDI that Cutter Group implemented has delivered significant time-savings for firefighters and support staff at West Midlands Fire Service. Log-in times have reduced from 20-30 minutes to less than one minute, and the need for hour-long Windows updates has been removed altogether. As a result, employees can spend more time recording information, planning and implementing initiatives that will help to save lives.

The improved application performance also allows employees to work more flexibly and efficiently. If firefighters are called out to respond to a 999 emergency part way through writing a report at one fire station, they can log in again from another fire station later, resume the same session and complete their report.

As part of its desktop virtualization strategy, West Midlands Fire Service has reduced costs by installing thin clients at its fire stations, rather than having to invest in more expensive replacement PCs. Furthermore, because firefighters can log in and out of the desktops easily and share computing resources more effectively, the organisation has been able to reduce the number of computers at fire stations, creating additional cost savings.

Finally, the VDI enables West Midlands Fire Service to allow employees to access their desktops from home for the first time. The organisation anticipates that this new capability will support its strategy to cut costs at its headquarters. "West Midlands Fire Service plans to reduce its physical office space by 50% in the future, and our new VDI will help us achieve this goal, by allowing employees to work effectively from home," Bentley explains.