



Case Study: Alliance Community Hospital

Alliance Community Hospital is a non-profit, 204-bed facility in northeastern Ohio. The hospital serves the community in and around Alliance, Ohio with services that include in-patient care, rehabilitation, an occupational medicine center, Visiting Nurse and Hospice services and a home medical supply company.

Like most community hospitals, Alliance has a mission to deliver the best medical care, a component of which is the ability to provide quick, reliable communications between doctors, staff and administrators. As part of this effort, the hospital has used IPsec-based remote access technology for several years to allow remote access to data center resources for doctors and staff. Through this system, doctors can gain remote access to hospital records, digital X-rays and other information that they need to make fast and well-informed decisions about patient care.

IPsec Access Pain

Since the ACH's IT staff began offering and using remote access five years ago, the volume of remotely-accessed applications and the number of users steadily grew to the point at which the IPsec-based solution had become inefficient. Some 50-60 physicians were using the service simultaneously, along with another 40 hospital administrators and IT personnel.

“Our goal is to centralize all applications here at the hospital so there's nothing installed on remote PCs,” says Daniel Yarian, IT Operations Coordinator at Alliance Hospital. “We want people to use remote access to get what they need easily, so the only thing they need to have installed on their computer is a Java-enabled browser.”

The hospital had already enabled Meditech Hospital Information Systems (HIS) software, a GE PACS digital x-ray imaging solution for remote viewing of x-rays, and some administrative programs, but Yarian and his staff of eight had a more ambitious plan that included using VMWare to provide virtual access to any resource. Unfortunately, the effort was hampered by the finicky IPsec client used for remote access.

“Our staff was spending way too much time installing and troubleshooting our IPsec VPN client,” says Yarian. “We constantly had to help users install, configure and repair their client software, and it was taking us away from a lot of other projects that would have made better use of the time.”

By early 2007, Yarian and his team knew they had to make a change. SSL VPN technology seemed to offer the best answer since its browser-based access would eliminate client configuration issues. So, the team researched a range of SSL VPN solutions from major network firms. Ultimately, the team found SSL VPN products from major networking equipment vendors to be either too complex or not flexible enough to meet the hospital's needs.

In addition, the team was concerned about using SSL VPN at all, since some of its typical products had reputations for significantly slower performance than those used by IPsec clients. Because doctors would be accessing x-rays and other rich content through the system, speed was an important consideration.

The NeoAccel Solution

After a demonstration of NeoAccel's SSL VPN-Plus solution, Yarian and his team found that they could combine the simplicity of browser-based access with the performance of a dedicated IPsec client. “The SSL VPN-Plus product's performance and management console really stood out from the rest,” he says. “It was much faster and easier to use than other products we reviewed.”



Over the summer of 2007, the ACH IT team implemented use of the SGX-1200 model of NeoAccel's SSL VPN-Plus product line. Initial testing started in July 2007 with the IT staff and a handful of other users involved. The solution has been gradually rolled out to the rest of the user base since that time.

To date, Yarian has deployed the remote access control features of SSL VPN-Plus. However, he plans to eventually activate the product's endpoint security checking feature, along with more user-specific access control features, in the near future.

"We will be implementing multi-layer security to give specific users access to specific resources because that's the best way to optimize performance and security," he says. For example, not all doctors using SSL VPN-Plus will have access to the PACS system for x-rays, or to a new system for accessing digital EKG results.

Yarian says that as plans to enhance the remote access solution proceed, the NeoAccel solution has delivered significant productivity benefits. "The main issue for our team is that it really limits our involvement in distribution and setup of the remote access capability," he says. "We used to have to burn CDs and wait for the doctor to come into the hospital—and then maybe install it for him—and then do it all over again whenever someone changed computers. With SSL VPN-Plus, we can simply tell people to download the NeoAccel client and proceed."

The NeoAccel solution eliminated remote access headaches for ACH users, freed up the IT staff for more important work, and created a stable, high-performance infrastructure for the facility's ongoing transition to host-based applications.

"This was the right call for us," says Yarian. "There's always a period of transition with new hardware, but overall, we have been very, very pleased with it. NeoAccel's claim is that their SSL VPN is even faster than an IPsec connection, and so far, it's true. I'm very pleased with the product, and so is everyone else."