Swansea Housing Association reduces IT Support time by 97%

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NetOp® Remote Control

Challenge
- Needed a solution that worked on all versions and platforms
- IT support calls taking up to 90 minutes if involving second site
- Company expanded to third site, with larger network stretching IT resources
- Laptops exposed to infection when leaving network

Solution
- Selected NetOp Remote Control to manage computers and networked devices remotely and enable proactive maintenance
- Installation on 33 machines took just one hour
- Easily integrated with existing software

Results
- 97% decrease in IT support time
- Efficient handling of day to day support issue - 9 out of 10 problems resolved remotely
- 90% reduction in off-site visits and associated costs
- Zero zero-days as malicious code can't execute

Swansea Housing Association has grown from refurbishing a handful of terraced houses in 1978 to owning nearly 3,000 homes in and around the Swansea and Neath Port Talbot areas.

With a £40 million development budget in the coming year and specialising in urban regeneration, the Association has been at the forefront of successfully integrating social housing with commercial and leisure developments in Wales.
Regional and National Awards put the Association's urban regeneration achievements up with the market leaders in the private sector.

Housing is a vital element in wider economic and urban regeneration and very often the catalyst for much of the improvement. We work in partnership with local councils, regional bodies, businesses, voluntary and community organisations.

Innovation and a "can do" attitude is synonymous with Swansea Housing Association and key to the Association's success. Amalgamation with the Dewi Sant Housing Association in early 2008 will increase the property portfolio to over 5,000 and present a number of new IT challenges.

Using NetOp
David Piggford, IT Manager at the SHA said: "We've always used a remote control solution, and had previously been running Stac's Reachout. However, this just fizzled out when a newer version of Windows was released and it just stopped working. I needed a solution that worked across our two sites on all versions and platforms.

We shortlisted a couple of solutions including NetOp, which I already had experience of. We didn't think much of PcAnywhere and the free solution RealVNC didn't have half of the functionality or security of NetOp, the reality is that you always get what you pay for. NetOp was the clear leader in our eyes."

NetOp Remote Control is designed specifically to meet the needs of corporate business, and is typically used for remote network management, remote system administration and in helpdesk environments. Based on an incredibly stable, fast and user-friendly remote control system, NetOp Remote Control offers unrivalled flexibility, supporting all commonly used operating systems and communication protocols. What's more, NetOp Remote Control software offers the most comprehensive security regime on the market.

"We decided to go for the best solution we could, and rolled out NetOp Remote Control across the SHA network" continued Piggford.

Expanding into new sites
Whilst the unification of both housing associations makes sound business sense, it also creates several problems for SHA's IT team in having to expand to include a significantly sized third office location.

David Piggford leads a team of three IT specialists, two of which provide first line support. As Dewi Sant had no IT support facility, this small SHA team saw its network expand dramatically, and resources were instantly stretched.

In addition, the SHA team were now having to support a totally different environment. The SHA IT system runs on the Microsoft Windows platform including; Exchange Server, SQL, Office, some financial software and a bespoke estate management solution. The DSHA network on the other hand, runs on Microsoft Terminal Services, a very different set up.

When dealing with a problem on one of the DSHA computers, the SHA team was venturing into the unknown. They did not know how the system was built, or how it worked, so supporting the users became a lot harder.

SHA immediately deployed NetOp Remote Control to all 33 machines in the DSHA network.
This marked the first stage in the huge task of linking the two systems, as well as the upgrade process for all 85 machines in the SHA group to the latest version, as well as six in the Neath local office.

Incredibly, the DSHA installation on the 33 machines took place in just one hour, and didn't even require a site visit! We simply asked all users to turn their PC's on and automatically deployed the solution to all machines. Easy!

Results

The IT support team needs to run multiple applications at once. Prior to the use of the NetOp Remote Control solution, they couldn't open any more than 2 or 3 applications at once, for fear of crashing the computer. However, with the added stability of running NetOp, and the reliability this brings, they now work on very large, 18 inch screens with 10-12 windows open at any one time. This makes their jobs easier as information is more readily accessible.

Mike Kibblewhite, Managing Director of NetOp said; "In the past, when dealing with an IT support issue, each member of the IT team had to work through lots of problems, and navigate through the screen in their heads. Now, 9 out of 10 times, they connect directly to the 'problem' PC and fix it quickly. The SHA/DSHA project is a prime example of how remote technology just makes sense."

David Piggford added: "NetOp has become so integral to the way that we work, that we just wouldn't move to a newer platform if it didn't work with NetOp. This was highlighted when we started working with Dewi Sant, as we realised how impossible it would be to manage without it.

All PCs are built to specification, and every unit is a bespoke build for each individual. There was a time when we could memorise every screen and talk users through how to fix each problem. But now, software changes so regularly it would be impossible to remember everything! It's a lot easier to help when you can see the screen with NetOp." continued David .

Previously, David and his team had to conduct a prolonged process of physically visiting the PC reviewing the issue, deciding if it was an 'on-screen' problem, or a server issue, then possibly running down to the server, returning to the machine and so on. Now, the whole process is more efficient. The use of Remote Control saves running around in person, and takes only 3 minutes to fix something that would have previously taken an average of 90 minutes, including a car journey, if it was at our second site. That's a massive time saving of over 97%, because of instant access to the root of the problem. This is supported by the reduction of the amount of trips the IT team has to make, as they are able to fix 9 out of 10 problems remotely.

David continues, "We're big fans of NetOp Remote Control and are looking at some of their other solutions including NetOp Process Control to manage IT policies and procedures and NetOp Instruct for internal staff training. We were voted one of the Sunday Times Top 100 UK Best Small Companies to Work for in 2007 so I guess we must be doing something right."

Summary

NetOp has provided an easy to use Remote Control solution for SHA, and its amalgamation with DSHA, to fully answer its IT needs. The relationship between the two companies has been positive, not only helping to provide a 97% reduction in time, but 90% reduction in off-site visits and associated costs.

SHA is very pleased with the great experience they've had from NetOp Remote Control. David Piggford finished by saying; "NetOp is a great company to work with. They are lovely products and they do exactly what they say on the tin, which is a very rare thing in the world of software and the hype that often goes with it. NetOp delivers and that makes it worth singing its praises."

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