

Inside Healthcare Computing

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Netilla Networks Has New Approach To Virtual Private Networking

Have you ever faced the problem of MDs upgrading their browsers, then howling because they'd lost access to an important clinical system? That used to be a problem for Virtua Health, too.

Assistant VP for Technology Tom Pacek explains. MDs at Marlton, N.J.-based Virtua were upgrading to Internet Explorer 6. For a time, MSIE 6.0 wasn't compatible with the Siemens Dashboard, a Web-based portal to clinical information. Naturally, they complained to IT. The situation was frustrating for Mr. Pacek. "I can't control what doctors do in their private offices," he said.

Then Virtua stumbled upon Netilla Technologies, which offers an application-layer approach to the virtual private network. Netilla transmits by terminal emulation (basically, a screen scraper), so that the browser's compatibility with the application was no longer an issue.

End of problem. It was wonderful.

If the users we asked are representative, then Netilla Networks, Somerset, N.J., is the vendor with everything: a reasonably priced product that installs rapidly and solves an important problem for hospitals and health systems.

That problem is providing physician offices with secure, convenient access to remote data without having to send an IT staffer out to actually install something on the MD's system. By facilitating direct order entry from MDs' homes or offices, it may even enhance safety. "It cuts out middlemen," said Chris Butler, Regional Director of technical services, St. Barnabas Health Care System, Livingston, N.J.

Implementation at Virtua Health took "two days at most," Mr. Pacek said. Mr. Butler said St. Barnabas was up in "a couple of days...I was expecting to spend 30 days on it." Deborah Heart and Lung Center, Browns Mills, N.J., did the work in house and was up in about a week.

St. Barnabas paid about \$18,000 for 50 users (\$360 each) and pays \$2,500-\$3,000 per year maintenance. A 100-port box goes for about \$30,000, said Netilla spokesman Ted Dupont. That compares with the \$150,000 St. Barnabas previously paid for a remote access server with 1-800 dialup access. ROI was pretty straightforward, said Butler.

Netilla isn't picky about whom it associates with. St. Barnabas uses it to access Eclipsys 7000. Deborah Heart and Lung connects with Meditech. Virtua, as mentioned above, connects with Siemens. All three report highly satisfactory results. Netilla says its newest version, the Security Platform Release 4, will also allow access to web and intranet-based applications.

Training is almost unnecessary. Deborah handed MDs a 3-4 page instruction sheet; Virtua posted a "help sheet" on its web site.

No one we interviewed doubted its security. The MD logs into Netilla from any browser and sees a desktop capable of launching hospital applications. Netilla uses browser-based encryption to guard the transmission between the MD and the hospital. From there, they can be presented with any applications the organization chooses. Applications are protected through authentication; Virtua's system allows a single sign-on.

Siemens wanted to give MDs secure tokens for outside access. Physicians, who didn't want anything extra to carry around, "fought us tooth and nail on that," Mr. Pacek said. With Netilla, a token is not necessary.

Users talked most about Netilla as an alternative to Citrix, which can accomplish many of the same feats, but at a higher price, with more complexity, and with less flexibility. "Multiple legacy applications" would not work with Citrix, Mr. Pacek said.

The underpinnings. Unlike traditional virtual private networks, which work on the network level, Netilla functions within the application layer, which gives you the ability to use application-level security to enforce policies for remote access.

The physician launches a browser and sends a secure message to an application-layer VPN proxy inside the health system firewall. The proxy authenticates the user, translates data to the appropriate application server protocol, and sends it to the appropriate terminal server. The server responds to the proxy request and sends a message through the proxy, through the firewall, and back to the remote user.

Even though connectivity is through a browser, the terminal server application makes it look as if the remote user is working in an actual application. Response times seem quicker than virtual private networks, Mr. Butler said.

The client wish list is short:

1. Netilla hasn't got load balancing working yet, Mr. Pacek said. Virtua acquired a second VPN proxy box for utilization sharing. Right now, its just sitting there as a spare.
2. The Windows terminal server in use at Virtua Health Care supports only certain printers, Mr. Pacek said. Strictly speaking, its not a Netilla problem, but it does come with the territory. Virtua put a link up on its Netilla desktop that tells MDs which printers are supported.

Citrix has better reporting capabilities, Mr. Butler said. That didn't sound very important to him, but it might be to some.