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Simon Chan
Technical Manager

HK Life Secures Network with Cost-efficient Solution from F5 Networks

Industry:

Insurance

Challenges:

- Efficient and consistent operation
- User-friendliness
- Seamless integration with existing content filtering solution

Solution:

F5's FirePass 1000

Benefits:

- Complete IPSec remote access replacement for improved productivity
- Dynamic policy-based access for greater security and network control
- Secure and ubiquitous application delivery to users

Overview

Hong Kong's leading insurance company, Hong Kong Life, was formed in 2001 when five local banks agreed to commit their resources to the development and promotion of insurance services for individuals and corporate customers. These banks are Asia Commercial Bank, Liu Chong Hing Bank, Shanghai Commercial Bank, Wing Hang Bank and Wing Lung Bank.

Collectively, Hong Kong Life has over 50 years of experience in serving customers of its shareholding banks with quality insurance products.

Hong Kong Life leverages its extensive network of 200 branches in the Special Administrative Region (SAR) and its strong workforce to serve its customers and intermediaries. The company also offers a comprehensive portfolio of insurance products and services through its shareholding banks.

Challenges

For Hong Kong Life, its operation is highly dependent on interaction with staff from its shareholding bank branches. At any given hour, the company needs to maintain updated customer data and documentation in all of the 180 branches.

Hong Kong Life, in planning for its VPN infrastructure, was aware of the different flavours of IPSec VPN and the relative cost-performance benefits they could deliver. IPSec VPN is a technology that uses public Internet with advanced encryption to safeguard the data that is being transmitted. However, there has been debate in the technical community over its ability to handle security at the user level.

The company began to test the efficiency of IPSec VPN, and in January 2004 it deployed IPSec VPN to link two of its bank networks.

“Security issues had prevented our other member banks from undertaking the planned enterprise-wide IPSec VPN deployment. We then had to address these security concerns and ensure the integrity and security of valuable customer data, while maintaining the cost-performance ratio,” said Simon Chan, technical manager, Hong Kong Life.

Solution

Chan approached Hong Kong Life's long-time technology partner, B&Data Technology Co., Ltd. (B&Data), for a possible solution to this challenge. B&Data suggested replacing the company's current IPSec VPN infrastructure with SSL (Secure Socket Layer) VPN.





SSL VPN is a higher layer security protocol that sits close to the applications and it requires authentication at the user level for greater security.

B&Data, along with systems integrator Macroview Telecom, worked with Hong Kong Life to test various leading SSL VPN solutions against a set of very stringent criteria. FirePass from F5 Networks met these requirements.

“Although cost is a factor, the heavier weightage was in performance, particularly to the users and our work processes. We wanted a solution that runs efficiently, causes almost no disruption to operations, is user-friendly and, importantly, can be seamlessly integrated with our content-filtering solution. We tested three vendors for SSL VPN and in the end, selected F5 for its outstanding performance,” Chan explained.

Their final choice was the F5 FirePass 1000, a Web-based appliance that offered complete IPSec remote access replacement for improved workforce productivity. It also provided dynamic policy-based access for greater security and network control.

“We found F5 FirePass 1000 far more superior when compared to the other SSL VPN solutions tested. Those solutions turned out to be complex to run and required Java Run Time application. However, F5 FirePass 1000 did not require us to install anything on the client level, which was a real boon to us. We did not have to disrupt front-end users to upload applications. Moreover, F5 FirePass helped us to maximize our existing IPSec VPN environment by working seamlessly

with our content filtering application,” Chan noted.

Chan further added that F5 Networks has a distinct advantage over its competition in the area of technical support. While it would take the other vendors days to send staff on-site to help sort out deployment issues, F5’s technical support professionals in Hong Kong and Seattle (the company’s headquarters) were able to provide quick response to issues during the integration stage.

Using F5’s solution, Hong Kong Life was able to network the insurance office in all shareholding banks in a secure manner.

“With security issues behind us, our shareholding banks are considering using F5 FirePass 1000 in their branch offices too,” said Chan.

Cost was a concern that F5 Networks addressed with Hong Kong Life. Pricing for F5 FirePass 1000 was based on concurrent users. With this pricing, Hong Kong Life only needed to subscribe 25 concurrent users instead of the network of users. This licensing policy helped Hong Kong Life to manage its costs. Additionally, the company saved time and resources further as the banks’ customer service staff can access important customer data directly without having to route their requests via Hong Kong Life customer service centre staff.

“The secure, reliable Web-based connectivity had significantly enhanced our workflow. Productivity had increased by 50% and staff efficiency had improved 60%. Our customer service staff could now shift their attention to provide banking customers more valuable services instead of

assisting with the usual mundane requests such as policy expiration dates, etc. Hong Kong Life could realize all these significant enhancements without high costs upfront. We expect to recover our investment within one year,” Chan said.

Another cost-saving Hong Kong Life enjoyed was expenditure on paper.

“Before this solution, Hong Kong Life printed admin reports for all five banks every day using stacks and stacks of paper. Now, users can directly access the reports or find information ,more quickly without these daily printouts. By eliminating the daily print-outs, we are, in our own little way, doing our part to save the trees and our environment,” said Chan.

Conclusion

Having implemented and enjoyed the benefits of F5 FirePass in its insurance partners, Hong Kong Life now plans to leverage the solution for secure remote access data in its Business Continuity Plan. That would be in response to local regulatory requirement to back up data, servers and applications. Hong Kong Life envisaged that by the end of 2006, the company will be using F5 FirePass to secure manage the roll-out of new service enhancements to frontline staff in the network.

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