Taking back control: How businesses can save money on bandwidth

The trend for increasing numbers of employees and customers to bring their own devices can seriously impair a business.

The problem is that as more devices are used, a business can quickly discover that its Cloud-based applications for payments, accounting, stock control, CRM or ERP are hopelessly sluggish.

The escalating load on bandwidth slows down the use of these essential applications and is usually followed by a rapid increase in costs as the business seeks to cope by buying more capacity.

However, businesses can reduce costs and put themselves back in control if they have access to the right tools and expertise, particularly on a managed services basis. It is possible to reduce excessive bandwidth use through a process of scoping, assessment, gatekeeping and throttling back.

The result is that businesses continue to work at full optimisation and need not fear that continuity will be badly affected by unexpected surges or unexplained traffic. This is a reduction in use and cost that can also be implemented without any significant detriment to staff morale.

Of course the Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) trend is embraced by many organisations to boost productivity. On the one hand staff are more comfortable working on a device they own and may be more likely to finish work on the train or at home. On the other hand, it reduces the wear and tear on laptops and tablets provided by the company.

However, once employees have their own devices at work, the corporate WAN is likely to be used for a variety of purposes that place severe and expensive pressure on bandwidth.

Many employees for example, feel it is legitimate to download newer versions of software or different applications to their devices to help them work faster. While this may be true, it can pile up problems into the network.

Others will continually use bandwidth-hungry applications, such as social networks or YouTube, while those with less scruples will be downloading films and games to their devices over the company Wi-Fi. It is also common for employees to bring two smartphones to work, both of which will automatically log on to the employer's Wi-Fi system.

This pressure on bandwidth makes it very difficult when businesses want to facilitate flexible working but have finite resources and quite rightly do not wish to be constantly upgrading WAN connectivity, with heavy impact on costs.

Unfortunately, few large businesses really know how many devices their employees are using on their systems or who they are being used by.

Many have only a hazy notion of the amount of bandwidth their own applications use or which applications they are running. Mergers and acquisitions often complicate matters and make it difficult to obtain a complete picture of two previously diverse organisations.

Yet the BYOD phenomenon is not just about employees.

In retail, the increasing use by customers of in-store Wi-Fi can place great strain on bandwidth during seasonal rushes. Retailers who have invested in mobile point-of-sale technology then find it works so slowly it almost negates the purpose of having it. Surges in Wi-Fi use can even slow down the local area network and affect fixed point-of-sale equipment.

A managed service provider can use its expertise and objectivity to address these problems. Site surveys will determine what is running across a network, allowing the business to determine the applications that are priorities and who should use them.

Applications that are interactive and in constant use, requiring log-ons and the regular up- or downloading of data may not be best suited to the Cloud, whereas an application used as infrequently as once per day or week should be lodged there.

While Google, Amazon and others are persuasive in pushing the benefits of Cloud computing, organisations need to consider the effect on their wide area connectivity before they opt to put major applications in the Cloud.

Once a measured assessment has been conducted and a business has established its priorities, devices can monitor and measure the use of applications, such as YouTube or Facebook and control their hours of usage or turn them off. Use can be restricted to lunchtimes or to a limited period after the official end of the working day. Other applications being accessed by employees may on the other hand, have little effect and can be permitted without problem.

In the case of Wi-Fi access, devices can control levels of use, whether by employees or customers' smartphones. It does, nonetheless, require expertise and a full assessment, as blocking access is considerably easier than throttling back on bandwidth.

Throttling back on connectivity can result in end-point devices using more processing power, and if not properly managed, will slow them down.

Overall then, when facing the increasing pressures on bandwidth from BYOD and the growing use of Cloud applications, businesses do not automatically have to invest in more costly bandwidth.

Instead of being overwhelmed and setting aside more resources for a costly quick-fix, organisations can use managed services expertise to reduce costs and give themselves a more long-term and robust solution.

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