

InformationWeek

Business Innovation Powered By Technology

November 28, 2005

Telecommuting: An EPA Energy Credit

SOFTWARE FROM IPASS GIVES THOUSANDS OF EPA EMPLOYEES EASY, SECURE ACCESS TO AGENCY INFORMATION

By Elena Malykhina

Cleaner air isn't usually one of the top reasons for an employer to support telecommuting, but the Environmental Protection Agency tries to live by what it preaches. The EPA permits up to 30% of its 18,000-strong workforce to telecommute one or two days a week, partly because it contributes to reduced auto emissions.

What's more, part of the EPA's workforce--such as its policy experts, inspectors, and the emergency first responders who helped clean up damage from the recent hurricanes on the Gulf Coast--needs access to the EPA's intranet from the field for information such as policy data and inspection records.

But like any organization that supports telecommuting and mobile workers, the EPA faced challenges securing networks and creating a simple way for employees to get online, regardless of where they were working. The federal agency says it has been able to address many of those issues with iPassConnect, a software client from iPass Inc. that offers dial-up, Ethernet, and Wi-Fi connectivity under a single interface.



Support for telecommuting broadens access to top talent, the EPA's Day says.

Before it installed iPassConnect two years ago, the agency restricted what employees could access remotely because of security concerns. "It used to be difficult for us to manage our remote workers, so instead of providing all the essential information, we just provided workers with the basics," says EPA CIO Mark Day. iPassConnect links employees to the Internet via iPass' NetServer, which protects user credentials as they are sent from an Internet service provider to the EPA. Aventail Corp.'s Secure Sockets Layer VPN client gives EPA employees access to the agency's data sources and servers. That lets the EPA's managerial staff do things like approve travel vouchers and employee payrolls from their home offices or while traveling on business, Day says.

iPass contracts with a number of network-service providers globally, such as British Telecom, SBC Communications, and T-Mobile, giving its customers access to thousands of Wi-Fi hot-spots and Ethernet access points. That relieves the EPA from

managing multiple Internet connectivity agreements. iPassConnect lists all the available networks for employees when they sign on. "I couldn't strike enough vendor agreements around the country to replicate this type of access," Day says. And having a single interface saves time for employees, eliminating the need to search out networks from different applications on their laptops and mobile devices.

Since implementing iPassConnect, the agency has been able to cut costs that came from working with multiple Internet service providers, and it has been able to make broadband more widely available so that employees can access things such as digital maps and video files, Day says.

Telecommuting On the Rise

Technologies of the type iPass provides could prove valuable among the growing legions of employers that are considering telecommuting to reduce employee travel time, cut office real-estate costs, help workers balance their work and home lives, and increase productivity. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and skyrocketing gas prices, President Bush voiced his support for telecommuting. Like iPass, companies such as GoRemote and Fiberlink offer client software that makes it easy for users to get into their company data sources through the vendors' network-aggregation agreements.

JALA International, a research and consulting group, and the International Telework Association and Council forecast that there will be more than 40 million telecommuting U.S. workers by 2010. That's going to raise a number of additional support issues for IT departments, such as developing standardized user configurations for both on-site and remote workers, and developing a system for providing software and system upgrades to remote workers, according to Forrester Research.

But having the right tools to make it easy for workers to telecommute broadens a company's access to top talent by removing geographic boundaries. That means the EPA can convince an ideal candidate who lives in Chicago to come work for it without having to move her family to Washington, D.C. "If you don't offer telecommuting or remote access," says Day, "it pulls you down and limits the people that want to go work for you."



www.ipass.com