

Westar Energy, Kansas

Case Study – Utilities

COLUMBITECH



SUMMARY

Westar Energy, the largest electric utility in Kansas, is using Columbitech Mobile VPN to provide its mobile workforce secure and persistent wireless access to a dispatch and work order application running on computer terminals in the company's service trucks.

BACKGROUND

Westar Energy was transitioning from a private land radio system to a public cellular network to communicate with the Panasonic Toughbook computers used by the mobile service crew. Westar Energy invested in a communication hub called the OnComm Rocket™ from Utility Associates. This device enabled them to connect via both the cellular network and the Wi-Fi network in the service yards.

CHALLENGES

The public cellular network provided considerably better speed and coverage than the old radio network but did not meet Westar Energy's security requirements.

The handling of coverage gaps and roaming between the cellular and Wi-Fi networks caused problems. Every time a computer lost the network signal or moved from a cellular to Wi-Fi connection, it lost contact with the application server and the session had to be manually established again. This caused productivity loss and frustration among the users.

As a mobile infrastructure provider, our mission is to ensure our workforce always has secure and persistent wireless access to the latest information to provide critical services to our customers," says Mike Bozek, director of telecommunication at Westar Energy. "

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- FIPS 140-2 security
- Session persistence
- Ease of use
- Support for Linux
- Total cost of ownership (TCO)

Westar Energy was looking for a FIPS 140-2 certified solution that could provide secure remote access via both Wi-Fi and public cellular networks. It was also important that the solution improved the user experience by resolving problems with coverage gaps and roaming between the cellular and Wi-Fi networks. Finally, Westar Energy was looking for a solution that was cost-efficient and provided a low total cost of ownership. Linux and open source products were both considered.

SOLUTION

Westar Energy selected Columbitech Mobile VPN after careful evaluation of several different VPN products, including an open source VPN and other mobile VPN solutions.

"Other VPN solutions we tried did not meet our requirements for roaming and session persistence," says Mike Brozek. "Though the software was easy to maintain, it quickly proved to be an inefficient solution for our mobile users, who move around and frequently switch networks. Our mobile data application needed a VPN solution with session persistence."

Columbitech Mobile VPN is FIPS 140-2 certified and counts the U.S. military and government among its users.

"As a critical infrastructure provider, we must ensure that we follow best practices for security to protect our systems," says Mike Brozek. "Columbitech met all our security requirements."

Furthermore, Columbitech Mobile VPN provided the seamless roaming and session persistence that the company

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was looking for. This allowed the mobile workforce to switch easily among networks and continue to work during coverage gaps.

Unlike other VPN solutions tested by Westar Energy, the Columbitech Mobile VPN did not require any additional hardware for its server software and it was capable of sharing the server with other applications. Yet another benefit was that Columbitech offered support for Linux.

“Columbitech Mobile VPN uses considerably less server resources than the other mobile VPNs that we tested and offered support for Linux,” says Mike Brozek. “This requires fewer patches and updates and has lowered both the money we spent on the initial investment and the costs associated with support and maintenance.”

Overall, Columbitech Mobile VPN met all requirements and provided the lowest total cost of ownership.

IMPLEMENTATION

Westar Energy runs a redundant system with two Linux-based VPN servers in two separate locations. The Panasonic Toughbook computers run various versions of Windows and have a lightweight software VPN client. Currently the company has rolled out the system to a small user group, but eventually more than 550 users will be using Columbitech Mobile VPN for wireless access.

ADVANTAGES

- Best practices security (FIPS 140-2)
- Applications always available
- Increased productivity
- Less user frustration
- Lower maintenance and support costs



“Thanks to Columbitech Mobile VPN, we can securely dispatch work and service orders to our field crew and they can report back in realtime,” explains Mike Brozek. “It saves time and we can react faster in case of an emergency.”

The VPN has improved the user experience by making roaming between the Wi-Fi and cellular networks seamless with no need to log back in again after a coverage gap. The Columbitech Mobile VPN allows the applications to run even if the network changes.

“Our users work in harsh conditions with rain, wind, and cold. We want to make sure that our IT equipment does not add more frustration,” says Mike Brozek. “Columbitech Mobile VPN works seamlessly so that our users never need to think about the connection.”

Finally, Columbitech Mobile VPN provided the best value with the most cost-efficient initial investment and considerably lower cost for support and maintenance.

For more information, visit our web site, www.columbitech.com.