

Compact, compliant, secure and easy-to-use, Proxy helps Acosta keep 5000 users productive and up-to-date

Jacksonville, Florida-based Acosta represents over 1,600 consumer product manufacturers to the best-known grocery, convenience, discount club and drugstore chains in North America. Acosta has some 10,000 representatives in seventy-five locations across the United States and Canada - and as you might imagine, most of these representatives are very mobile.

Jim Harring, Eastern Regional LAN Manager for Acosta, provides PC and network support to about 5000 users, half of them moving targets.

“Most of our reps connect to us as needed via RAS or VPN, which makes them very inaccessible from an IT standpoint,” says Harring. “And putting dedicated IT staff in satellite offices or dispatching techs to solve problems is out of the question.”

Floppies, phones and FedEx

For a time, this meant Harring and his technical services support (TSS) group maintained and supported his mobile users via not-so-mobile methods.

“We updated anti-virus software and other critical applications by mailing distribution disks,” says Harring. “We solved customer problems by phone, our techs working by memory because they couldn’t see the users’ computer screens. And if we couldn’t solve a problem by phone we’d have the user FedEx the laptop to our office.”

Clearly Harring needed a remote control solution. He and his team experimented first with Network Associates’ Magic Remote Desktop. “We found that once the connection hit a router hop, it died,” says Harring. “We connect to our offices and users via frame relay, RAS, and VPN, and we needed a solution that worked over all these connection schemes.”

Harring then learned that one of his LAN administrators was testing a free trial of Proxy from Juniper Networks. Proxy lets anyone view and operate one or multiple remote PCs or file servers from his or her own PC, over any network, dial-up or Internet connection.

Small footprint eases big rollout

Based on his experience with competing solutions, Harring was certain that rolling out Proxy to his 5000 users would be his biggest challenge, because he connects to most of his employees via a 19.2Kbps RAS connection. But Proxy’s small footprint made the rollout a snap.

“With most remote control software, you have between fifteen and thirty-three megs that you have to get to each desktop before you can install,” he says. “But Proxy’s small enough to fit on two floppies. It takes about ten minutes to install it from a share point on our LAN.” Harring was even able to automate the install for some users. “I wrote a simple batch file that looked for Proxy whenever someone logged on to the network; if it didn’t find Proxy it forced the installation.”

“Proxy has a small footprint, doesn’t conflict with any other software we use, works over a wide variety of bandwidths, is incredibly simple to use and provides decent security. It’s everything an IT professional wants in a software program.”

Jim Harring
Eastern Regional LAN Manager
Acosta

Works over any connection

What impresses Harring most is that Proxy works over connections that he calls “impossible.”

“I’ve often used Proxy over a 14.6Kbps modem connection, and even used it once over a 9600Kbps connection when the user had a modem problem,” says Harring. “These are pipes you’d normally consider too skinny for transmitting data, let alone screen images and keystrokes and mouse movements.”

Harring says that the program works quite well over a 19.2Kbps RAS connection, the most common connection type he establishes with his remote users. He especially likes the feature that lets his techs black out users’ Windows wallpaper. “Big pictures of people and their dog hog a lot of bandwidth,” he says. “We used to ask folks to open a full screen Explorer window to block out these backgrounds, but now we can just block them out ourselves.”

Harring adds that Proxy even works over different MTUs (maximum transmission units), which is important when connecting via frame relay. “It keeps us from having to ask the user to make a registry change, which is a pretty hairy thing for most users to do,” says Harring.

Smarter, more cost-effective upgrades

Proxy lets Harring and his team replace CDs, phone calls, FedEx shipments and site visits with fast, efficient remote sessions. Harring gives a typical example.

“I just received an e-mail from a rep who needs to upgrade to Internet Explorer 6,” he says. “The old solution was to send a CD or talk him through a download from Windows Update, and in either case I’d have to phone him and guide him through the installation to make sure he installed the proper features. Now with Proxy I have him connect to the network, and then tell him to go to lunch while I install the upgrade. When I’m done I leave an open Notepad window that says thanks, have a nice day, and please restart your computer.”

Proxy lets Harring view and control several remote computers on one screen, a feature that helps him make quick work of large-scale upgrades. “Recently we wanted to upgrade all the McAfee Virus Scans in our Birmingham office, which is a time zone away from us,” he says. “We sent an e-mail telling the

users to bring in their laptops and leave the computer at the log-on prompt; then we “Proxied” onto each machine and upgraded them all, several at a time.”

This ability to service computers remotely means significant savings for Harring and Acosta. “In the past this kind of upgrade required flying a technician to the office and paying plane fare and hotel and meals,” says Harring. “Now we upgrade the entire office in an evening right from our office. My team’s travel expenses are one-third of what they used to be before Proxy.”

“Like adding two more admins to my staff”

Proxy lets Harring and his technical support staff provide better support to more users in a lot less time.

“We can provide a lot better support when we can see what’s happening on a user’s computer,” says Harring. “If someone’s having a problem with a complicated macro, we’ll just open the macro on his or her computer and make the changes to fix it. Other times we’ll just say ‘okay, I’m Proxied in, you drive and show me what you’re trying to do. Either way it saves us a longer phone call or a trip downstairs or worse, which frees up so much time.

“It’s like adding two more admins to my staff, in my opinion – that’s how much benefit I get from the program.”

Avoiding conflict

Another thing Harring likes about Proxy is how well it gets along with other software applications – a critical requirement for any application installed on Acosta’s computers.

“We represent over 700 manufacturers, many of whom require our users to use proprietary applications,” says Harring. “We have people running an FTP module for a SAP application inside an Excel spreadsheet. We have other people running a Seibel Web-based front end. We have people running all sorts of terminal emulators and dial-up applications, and other people running multiple versions of Office and Internet Explorer on the same computer. Proxy works with all of them, without any conflicts. I have HP Printer drivers that cause more conflicts than Proxy.” says Harring. “It’s everything an IT professional wants in a software program.



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