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CASE STUDY

Gynecologic Oncology Group

Customer profile

Non-profit, multidisciplinary cancer research group

Industry

Healthcare

IT environment

Administrative and financial offices and Statistical and Data Center supporting more than 160 affiliate organizations engaged in clinical trials.

Challenges

With a heavy reliance on in-house application development, GOG needed to derive maximum productivity from its small IT staff and its users.

McAfee solution

McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance 3200 and McAfee VirusScan Enterprise, a desktop-based anti-viral application, banished spam and malware while requiring little administrative overhead. McAfee ePolicy Orchestrator integrates the solution and provides reporting and auditing.

Results

- Blocks inbound and outbound spam emails and phishing expeditions
- Blocks web-borne malware
- Provides always-on and constantly updated automatic protection
- Assures business continuity and improves email availability
- Offers customization options for diverse user-group and computing environments
- Reduces administrative burden through uncompromised effectiveness and ease of use
- Saves time so limited IT staff resources can focus on development rather than support

McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance And McAfee VirusScan Enterprise Enable Cancer Research Group to Stay on Task

The non-profit Gynecologic Oncology Group (GOG) is a cooperative, multidisciplinary cancer research group focused on female pelvic malignancies such as ovarian, uterine, and cervical cancers. Its main function is to develop and run clinical trials and then analyze and distribute the results. Since its 1970 founding, GOG has grown from 11 member institutions to more than 50 principal centers and 160 affiliate organizations, completed more than 300 clinical trials, and contributed more than 550 peer-reviewed manuscripts. GOG's research efforts are supported by three offices: Administration (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Finance and Development (Crofton, Maryland), and Statistical and Data Center (Buffalo, New York).

Once burned—twice shy; twice burned—time to get the McAfee solution

Scott Gould is senior network and systems analyst in GOG's Statistical and Data Center (SDC). He presides over a network security infrastructure that includes the McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance 3200 (formerly McAfee Secure Internet Gateway 3200) and McAfee VirusScan Enterprise software, which runs on every server and user desktop and laptop PC. But that wasn't always the case.

In 2003, the GOG offices relied on different desktop-based anti-viral protection and a mail server-based SMTP filter. There was no HTTP filtering; it was up to the desktop product to stop web-based malware at the individual PC and laptop level.

"Remember the I Love You and Melissa viruses?" asks Gould. "Someone in our department released an infected file that slipped past the desktop product's defenses and went on to infect some of our file shares. That was the last file-level crisis I ever want to deal with." Soon all GOG's servers and desktop and laptop machines were running McAfee VirusScan Enterprise.

Then it was the SMTP filter's turn. GOG, which maintains close working relationships with many academic centers, suddenly began receiving a massive amount of spam email, apparently generated by several student PCs at a local university. "That onslaught brought the mail server to its knees," says Gould. "We were forced to cut off all email from the university until things were cleaned up. We couldn't even let the email get through to the server. But we would have been OK if we could have offloaded the traffic to a gateway appliance." Lesson learned.

Even before the desktop and mail-server-based products failed in their moments of truth, Gould knew the products' days were numbered. For example, neither product offered the simplicity and extensive customizability Gould wanted. Consider the following: the GOG profile includes four user types and six categories of differently configured servers. Support technicians handle most installations manually and will create user-specific policies within the anti-viral software upon request. And Gould likes to create custom filters on the fly.

"All this was almost impossible to do with the old setup," Gould says. "We just couldn't wait around for these products to come up to our ease-of-use standards." Gould began investigating one-stop SMTP and HTTP filtering solutions that resided at the gateway, not on the server.

Simplicity, customizability, centralized control, and, ultimately, overall effectiveness were all key aspects of the ideal solution. After an intensive vetting process, GOG chose the McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance. "The confidence we had in our existing McAfee VirusScan Enterprise solution weighed heavily in our decision making," Gould says.

Make short work of tall orders with limited technical staff

GOG places a lot of emphasis on its in-house application development efforts, which require that the SDC IT staff squeeze whatever it can out of its network security solution.

"We don't outsource anything," says Gould. "If we need an application created—and we often do—it's done right here." The SDC staff is tasked with aiding in the design of the clinical trials, managing the data, publishing statistical reports, and more. However, Gould says, without the McAfee solution keeping the environment safe, "as a group, we couldn't support the office-to-IT-staff ratio we have—and the entire office wouldn't be able to produce nearly as much as it's capable of now."

In addition to Gould, the IT staff comprises two support technicians, two technical writers, and six developers. One "multi-task" support person is also on hand at both the Administration and Finance and Development offices. Gould and the technicians occasionally travel to the other locations to assist with major roll-outs, but generally, they take care of things from the Buffalo location. The three offices are connected over the Internet via encrypted VPN tunnels utilizing Cisco Pix Firewall technology. Gould takes advantage of the McAfee ePolicy

Orchestrator® (ePO™), a console for centrally managing both McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance and McAfee VirusScan Enterprise products, which adds up to big time savings.

Because the IT staff is small and tilted toward development rather than support, Gould and the technicians need the ability to act single-handedly and quickly. "A lot of responsibility falls on one person's shoulders a lot of the time," says Gould. "That's OK if you're dealing with only one fire—but when things get chaotic, you really need tools that work for you, not against you. That's the only way to stay damage-free and put a crisis behind you fast."

The McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance automatically handles "virtually all" of the HTTP and SMTP traffic that comes through the GOG offices, says Gould. "It gives us full control over inbound mail traffic and what our users are perusing on the Internet—even though their web surfing may be innocent, that doesn't make it harmless or impervious to infection."

The gateway appliance is so thorough, in fact, that Gould rarely needs to run reports on its operation. "I do monitor the system's data tools to make sure things are in line with expectations, such as whether we're getting the appropriate ratio of blocked email," he says. Over nearly three years, the McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance blocked more than 53 percent of GOG's incoming email as either spam or a phishing expedition. Of particular note, the system quarantined only .8 percent of all email traffic. That means more than 99 percent of the time, the McAfee Email and Web Security Appliance definitively classified email as acceptable or not. You can't argue with results like that. "Basically, it's 'set it and forget it'," Gould says. "With our McAfee solution, things just work."

And that translates directly into greater individual and organizational productivity.

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Control the gateway, lock down the desktop, and boost performance enterprisewide

No spam or viruses via email, no malware from the Internet, and mail servers that stay up and running. Those were big changes for GOG employees.

For example, the typical GOG user was dealing with at least 20 to 30 spam emails each day, according to Gould. Today, very little spam actually makes it to the desktop.

"I'm a perfect example," says Gould. "I used to routinely change my email address once every year just so I could start fresh. Well, I haven't changed my email address in more than two years—and I average one spam a day, if not fewer. McAfee's spam filtering engine has been nothing short of a godsend."

Similarly, now that their HTTP traffic is being filtered, GOG users have seen desktop infections virtually disappear. "Maybe once a month we'll see a pop-up from a file that made it through to a machine before being tackled by the desktop product," says Gould. "Web-based malware that hits a machine is down to almost nothing."

Gould hasn't tried to measure the time savings and productivity gains conferred by the McAfee solution. But he knows it is substantial, especially when accumulated year after year. "The system has benefited everyone—from users to the support techs who help users to every one of our members who interacts with a GOG office," says Gould. "If you add all that up, over time, we're able to spend much more time doing what we're here to do: stay focused on clinical trials trying to find a cure for cancer."

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