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F5’s FirePass SSL VPN Part of Key Government Contractor’s Initiative to Support Emerging Middle East Government

Industry:

U.S. Government

Challenges:

- Create a cost-effective financial management infrastructure
- Develop a government-wide strategy to support the automation of budget execution
- Provide a secure means of connectivity for transactions and tracking

Solution:

FirePass SSL VPN

Benefits:

- Secure, versatile and reliable remote access
- Minimized training and ramp up
- Increased productivity and significantly reduced support calls
- Automated policy configuration

Overview

In September of 2004, a large U.S. government agency contracted a leading global management and technology consulting firm to provide a wide range of services including Information and Communications Technology (ICT) support to a developing government in the Middle East. The contracted agreement supported efforts aimed at improving stability, ensuring the delivery of essential services, and facilitating economic recovery in the developing country during its critical transition period. Over the three-year agreement the contracted firm has provided a wide range of ICT support to a number of government entities including the Ministry of Finance (MOF), Ministry of Trade (MOT), Ministry of Electricity (MOE), General Commission of Taxes (GCT) and the Central Bank.

The work included technical assistance in budget execution and planning, intergovernmental finance, tax administration, tax planning, regulatory, and functional support in the electricity and telecommunications sectors, as well as IT. The contracted firm’s cross-cutting IT team was mandated to support these broad functional initiatives. Specifically, the IT group implemented the developing government’s Financial Management Information System

(FMIS) for the country’s Ministry of Finance.

The contracted firm is leveraging F5’s FirePass SSL VPN as a key component to providing government workers with secure, remote access to the financial system. Not only has this saved U.S. taxpayers money by providing a low-cost solution to a potentially high-cost infrastructure, it has mitigated the need for employees to travel among Ministry locations. Most importantly, the people of the developing nation have benefited as they’re able to efficiently build an infrastructure that can be a foundation for stability and continuing economic development.

Challenge

A financial management infrastructure was virtually nonexistent when the contracted firm began work on the initial project. Records were kept by hand and sent to a central location for entry into an antiquated legacy database application. It took up to three months to reconcile a single month’s worth of entries.

The IT team was challenged by the need to provide access to a financial management application that is extremely bandwidth-intensive and latency-sensitive, according to the consulting firm’s project manager. “We needed to





provide a secure means of connectivity in order for the national-level spending units to enter journal and expense vouchers into what is essentially a legacy client-server application,” he said. “Additionally, we had to implement this solution over a completely VSAT-based infrastructure, in an environment that’s about as far as you can get from your typical ‘business as usual’ scenario.”

Under the terms of the contract, one of the first steps was to develop a government-wide strategy to support the automation of budget execution. As a foundation, the contracted firm’s System Integration Team created the Financial Management Information System (FMIS), a new accounting and reporting system for all ministries. A key part of this initiative is providing government workers at over 100 remote sites with access to the applications while bringing their processes in line with international best practices for financial management.

The contracted firm faced a number of obstacles to creating and deploying FMIS, not the least of which was working in an extremely challenging and volatile environment. Because there is a general lack of technical expertise in developing countries, the solution had to be easy for IT staff to install, provision, manage, and maintain. It had to be fast and reliable in a low-bandwidth environment, extremely secure, and nearly transparent to the end-user. Equally as important, it had to be affordable and deliver a low total cost of ownership and high return on investment over an extended period.

Solution

After an evaluation of possible solutions, the contracted firm selected F5’s FirePass Controller as the SSL VPN solution for the project. “We had to move quickly,” reported a managing technician.

“FirePass came highly recommended, it was easy for us to provide, it’s low maintenance from a management standpoint, and we were able to train local IT personnel very quickly to use it.”

F5’s FirePass Controller enables enterprises to provide secure remote access to network resources using any web-enabled device and over a range of access networks, regardless of location. With a FirePass Controller, organizations benefit from superior performance and scalability, easy management, and the most advanced application security.

“We couldn’t have done this project for an acceptable cost and for acceptable risk without a remote access solution like FirePass,” said the technician. “Rolling out a solution using IPSec technology would not have worked because it would have required infrastructure at over 100 sites. It would have been expensive, unmanageable, and with greater risk due to additional travel needed for installation. With FirePass, we basically didn’t have to go anywhere to install, provision, manage, or troubleshoot initial connectivity to the application.”

“A critical part of rebuilding is to establish a legitimate and scalable IT environment. F5’s FirePass SSL VPN remote access solution can easily scale to support more users that need to connect to new applications phased in over the next several years. Local IT administrators have already been trained on FirePass; they can use these skills in the future to extend the infrastructure as needed.”

Benefits

Deploying FirePass enabled the contracted firm to deliver a very low-cost solution. “We would have had to either use a private VSAT link to every site or deploy a costly VPN solution,” added the

technician. “Not only would that have been prohibitively expensive and cost U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars, but the performance would be inadequate. With a bandwidth intensive, latency-sensitive applications like the one we’re using for financial management, the closer you can get the client tier to the server tier, the better.”

“There is no doubt that this is a better, faster, and cheaper way to deploy this financial management information system, in this environment. It’s been so successful that we’ve been able to duplicate the solution with virtually no changes and use it to help other emerging governments.”

Promoting transparency of the budget execution process has been a huge stabilizer in the country. Allowing accounting personnel across the country to access the new financial management application improves efficiency and has enabled the government to migrate from basic record-keeping to genuine financial management. Although the system is currently in a final rollout phase, it has already dramatically increased productivity and significantly enhanced the government’s ability to execute a budget. This brings economic policies and procedures in line with international best practices and helps build a foundation for private sector-led growth in the country.

Under challenging and sometimes dangerous conditions in an unstable country, the contracted firm was able to use FirePass in meeting, or exceeding, all contracted requirements in a timely manner—all within budget.

“A key element of this project is building capacity that enables self-sufficiency and long-term sustainability,” said the technician. “One of the most striking aspects of this project is that it has provided a unique opportunity to share cutting-



edge and innovative solutions with our Middle Eastern counterparts. It is highly unlikely that without this project, the Ministry of Finance IT staff would have had the

opportunity to become proficient on such a niche technology. With FirePass and the comprehensive training experience we were able to provide, we're confident that the IT

staff in the Ministry of Finance and other government entities will be able to take it from here."

**F5 Networks, Inc.
Corporate Headquarters**

401 Elliott Avenue West
Seattle, WA 98119
(206) 272-5555 Voice
(888) 88BIGIP Toll-Free
(206) 272-5556 Fax
www.f5.com
info@f5.com

**F5 Networks
Asia-Pacific**

+65-6533-6103 Voice
+65-6533-6103 Fax
info.asia@f5.com

**F5 Networks, Ltd
Europe/Middle-East/Africa**

+44 (0)1932 582 000 Voice
+44 (0)1932 582 001 Fax
emeainfo@f5.com

**F5 Networks
Japan K.K.**

+81-3-5114-3200 Voice
+81-3-5114-3201 Fax
info@f5networks.co.jp