



WHSmith introduces wireless connectivity to over 600 stores

HPE Networking solutions combine reliability with ease of management and high security

Objective

Introduce mobility to free staff from fixed, back office computing

Approach

Researched wireless network solutions from main vendors and evaluated them on technical soundness and cost

IT Matters

- Provides blanket wireless coverage across more than 600 stores
- Delivers easily managed, reliable networking with built-in survivability
- Features state-of-the-art authentication and security functions

Business Matters

- Increases productivity by releasing store managers from the back office
- Improves customer service by providing staff with instant access to information
- Gives stores a more up-to-date, modern image



WHSmith, a leading UK retail group, wanted to increase the productivity of its store managers and make them more available to customers by releasing them from the back office. Mobility was the key but rolling out a fleet of HP ElitePads required the installation of Wi-Fi in more than 600 stores. HPE Networking solutions was the answer.

Challenge

Restrictive environment

WHSmith is a household name in the UK and incorporates two business strands – travel and high street. The travel business operates over 700 units, mainly in airports, railway stations, motorway services and hospitals. The high street business includes more than 600 stores with a presence in nearly every significant UK town. It sells a wide range of products including stationery, greetings cards, reading materials and confectionery.

On the high street, WHSmith stores serve some 320 million customers a year. Supporting this level of business requires the full commitment and total efficiency of store staff but managers were not operating to full potential because they were tied to the back office by hard-wired desktop PCs.

“Because of the fixed nature of the infrastructure, store managers used to spend a lot of time accessing information in the back office. Introducing wireless mobility has increased their productivity and enables them to spend more time interacting with customers.”

– Steve Wood, head of store operations development, WHSmith

“The in-store PCs are our main communication and reporting hub,” says Steve Wood, head of store operations development at WHSmith. “Every communication that requires a store to do anything – all the trading-related activity, operational and health and safety work get sent through the PCs. They also receive the information needed to do the job such as planograms, space information, the ability to print shelf pricing in store and all the reporting information, both historic and current. It’s all pushed through those systems.

“Our aims were twofold. The first was to improve efficiency by simply reducing the amount of dead time, walking to and from the office to get information and the manual cascade from that, and the second was to move the time they were spending in the back office onto the sales floor, so making them more available for customer service.”

Solution

Freedom of mobility

Mobility was the key and following stringent benchmarking, WHSmith decided to equip its managers with HP ElitePad tablet PCs. Some 1,200 machines were to be rolled out across over 600 stores with just one machine in smaller stores and up to six in the larger ones. However, before this could happen the stores had to be equipped with wireless networks.

“Previously, the stores had all been hard-wired with no store-facing, complete coverage wireless networking,” says Wood. “Finding a new solution was very much driven by the IT team. After considering various vendors, Hewlett Packard Enterprise was the logical conclusion it came to, based on the infrastructure in store. It worked with HPE directly to come up with the right solution and obviously at the right cost.”



The HPE centralised WAN solution includes 2,452 access points which provide blanket coverage in over 600 stores, including back offices and stockrooms. It also features four HPE 870 Unified Wireless LAN controllers, two of which are located at the primary data centre and two at the backup centre, both of which are outsourced locations.

There are more than 600 HPE Power over Ethernet (PoE) switches and additional tools include HPE Intelligent Management Center (IMC) software, a comprehensive wired and wireless network management tool; HPE Network Traffic Analyzer (NTA) software which is an optional IMC module that delivers real-time and historical reporting on network application usage and HPE IMC Wireless Services Manager (WSM) which provides further reporting capabilities and summarises performance data.

HPE delivered networking support services and the actual Wi-Fi installation was carried out by WHSmith's partner Omnicore Digipos. During the project, HPE worked with British Telecom (BT), which built the package to be installed on the HP ElitePads, and with Microsoft®, who provided operating system consultancy.

Meetings have also taken place between WHSmith and the HPE Digital Experience Team who work with customers to help them get the most out of their retail mobility solutions. Possible future projects could include measuring footfall and collecting customer analytics to offer interactive services.

Benefits

Better customer service

The wireless networks have proved to be stable, reliable and easy to manage. The HPE centralised WAN configuration provides a high degree of network survivability with two pairs of active/standby controllers in different locations, thus minimising failure points. Encryption provides both central and local authentication and layered security features are also included.

"The HPE hardware is pretty reliable and we are not getting any issues with our Wi-Fi networks," says WHSmith project manager, Faye Sherman. "We have not realised the full benefit of IMC yet but our expectation is that it will allow us to proactively monitor the network."

Customer at a glance

Hardware

- HPE 870 Unified Wireless LAN Controllers
- HPE 425 Access Points
- HPE 1910-8G POE Switches

Software

- HPE Intelligent Management Center
- HPE Network Traffic Analyzer
- HPE Wireless Services Manager

HPE services

- HPE Networking Support Services

“HPE wireless networks have been very reliable and now provide blanket coverage throughout our stores both on the sales floors and in back offices and storerooms.”

– Faye Sherman, project manager, WHSmith

The HPE Wireless LAN has provided a firm foundation for WHSmith's mobility project which has achieved all its initial aims.

“Increased mobility supports efficiency improvements in the way stores are run and there are other slightly less tangible benefits on top of those,” says Wood. “In stores, there is a feeling of being more up-to-date and staff like using devices that are similar to the ones they would use in their personal lives.

“The benefit for customers is that the salesforce is more available to them, particularly the managers and this is often critical. They have the information at their fingertips so if customers want to understand about a product and the staff doesn't know the answer they can go to the website and provide recommendations, particularly for books. If we don't happen to have a book in stock, we can order it for them using customer ordering through the tablet. Customer perception is improved because they know staff can access information on the sales floor, without having to disappear to the back office, which neither customers nor staff like.”

“Managers can also work more efficiently because a lot of their day is taken up with reviewing performance and taking actions, and with the tablets, all the information is at their fingertips. Also there's a large amount of tactical activity and actions. Some are just the bread and butter of making the store run and some are promotional changes where they need to engage with staff and the tablet provides all information right at the point of action.”

Looking to the future, WHSmith now plans to extend mobility and wireless connectivity into its travel stores and possibly extending the use of Wi-Fi to include guest and customer services.

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