

Gen-i puts Solid Energy on Cloud 9

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- Christine Dormaar, Solid Energy Information Services Manager

State-owned energy company Solid Energy has its head in the clouds when it comes to keeping its computer systems secure from internet-borne nasties. Or, to be more precise, it has put its trust in a cloud security service from Gen-i, called Safecom, which gives Solid Energy protection from any web-based or email security threat.

It’s not that the business, which last year made a profit of more than \$110 million, doesn’t take internet security seriously. In fact, says Christchurch-based Solid Energy information services manager Christine Dormaar, it’s an “extremely important” part of her responsibilities.

“People need to have trust and faith that the information they’re accessing is correct and accurate, and how they are accessing it is secure,” Dormaar says. “And it’s going to become even more important in the future.”

Given its significance, it might therefore seem the kind of function an IS boss would want to keep control of. But Dormaar has no qualms about outsourcing the service to Gen-i, and her confidence has been well placed.

Cutting overheads

It’s a decision that goes back about seven years, when Dormaar was reviewing Solid Energy’s “border” security, at that time done in-house.

“It was an overhead to manage and look after and it was getting complicated. I hadn’t had any incidents but there had been some close calls.”

Solid Energy already had ample experience of outsourcing. In 1999, it contracted Computerland to provide a range of support services.

When she began looking around at security options, Safecom was recommended to her both by Computerland, and Telecom, another of Solid Energy’s suppliers.

“Both my Telecom representative and Computerland representative independently suggested Safecom was a good service to look at.” She assessed and reviewed the service, and liked what she saw and she signed up for it.

At the time Safecom was an offering of Telecom-owned internet service provider Xtra. Subsequent acquisitions — of Computerland and Gen-i by Telecom — mean Safecom is now one of several outsourced services Solid Energy relies on.

No-brainer

Dormaar says opting for Safecom was an easy decision. “It was actually a no-brainer because IT support services were contracted out and it was a nice discrete service to outsource. It had added benefits at the time around improved remote access, improved security, 24/7 monitoring and, financially, it was better than replacing the product set we had.”

Like most multi-site organisations, Solid Energy is heavily dependent on reliable, secure wide area network links. It has about 550 computer users scattered over a dozen sites on both islands.

Today Dormaar and about 10 IT staff keep systems well supported and developed over for what she describes as a technically high-end user community who are dispersed throughout Solid Energy's production facilities.

"Most of our engineering, geology, environmental and health and safety management is done at each of the sites."

The sites are generally connected to the corporate office in Addington, Christchurch via 2 megabit/s links, modest by today's broadband standards. But the Rotowaro site near Huntly is better served, with optical fibre to the gate.

That allows it to be used as a disaster recovery site, with key applications and data replicated from Christchurch.

Safecom at the centre

"Our connection through Safecom is our only connection to the outside world," Dormaar says.

The Gen-i One Office wide area network has a many-to-many topology, meaning each remote site is linked to Safecom, avoiding the bottleneck of first passing through Solid Energy's Addington corporate office.

"I can be sitting in Christchurch or Westport and, when I browse the internet, I go directly out through the Safecom link. I don't have a dependency on any single site for that connection."

Of the 11 services in the Safecom suite, Solid Energy employs about half.

"We're using general border security, email filtering and forwarding, remote access, internet browsing and hosted FTP sites," Dormaar says.

An online reporting tool and monthly reports from Safecom show activity. Payment for the service is monthly, with a traffic-based component that ensures Solid Energy only pays for what it uses.

Feedback through the clouds

Gen-i's Safecom might be a remotely delivered service but there's close contact between Gen-i and client. Dormaar says regular teleconferences are a good mechanism for making sure the service keeps up with Solid Energy's changing needs.

"We raise any concerns; we discuss what's working and what's not."

And roughly once a year the two parties meet to talk about future developments.

"That's good for us because we can say we've got these different challenges, and this is what we're planning to do, and it actually gives them an opportunity to see if they have another suitable service that we can take advantage of."

For organisations interested in sampling cloud computing, Safecom's border security service is a good place to start, Dormaar says.

Based on her Safecom experience — "in the time we've had it we've never had any serious outages or incidents" — she sees further potential in cloud computing for Solid Energy.

"I think it's an emerging service stream. As long as it's engineered correctly in the first place, addresses the business risks, and is cost-effective, it absolutely makes sense."

Services

Secure Web Service

Secure Mail Service

Secure Remote Access Service

Secure User VPN (Virtual Private Network) Service

Secure Site VPN Service

Business Benefits

Increased security

Reduced risk and liability

Focus on core business

Reduced costs and complexity

Reduced capital overheads

Reduced resources and costs

Reduced WAN/Server/Storage/ISP costs

Flexibility