



Customer story

Improved efficiency for the public sector

Ceredigion Council makes time and cost savings with Ericom's PowerTerm® WebConnect Enterprise



“We did not want to make cost savings at the expense of service delivery. With this initiative, we have achieved our goal of improving efficiency and can provide a higher quality of service to our IT users. We are very satisfied with the outcome.”

Ian Kendall, Server Support and Development Manager Ceredigion Council



BACKGROUND

At Ceredigion Council, the drive for greater efficiency has led to a whole new approach to IT. Located in the west of Wales, the local authority is responsible for a population of 74,000 and a county covering nearly 700 square miles.

The council has taken significant steps to improve the efficiency of its IT support team, leading to higher levels of service and reduced costs.

INDUSTRY

Public Sector

CUSTOMER

Ceredigion Council, Wales

PRODUCT

PowerTerm® WebConnect Enterprise

CHALLENGES

- Respond to Gershon targets for improved efficiency in back-office functions
- Reduce high cost of supplying and maintaining PCs for 1 500 users
- Improve response times from the IT support team, despite complexity of supporting users in multiple locations across the county

SOLUTIONS

- Replace desktop PCs with thin clients and shared servers
- Implement PowerTerm WebConnect Enterprise to provide easy access to 10 Windows-based applications and 6 UNIX-based applications via one single interface
- Successfully respond to more user requests remotely

RESULTS

- Improved efficiency and more effective use of technical resources within the IT department
- Reduced spending on new PCs and PC maintenance
- Faster response times to user requests, along with reduced travel costs

“We have significantly reduced the support time”

Like many local government organisations, Ceredigion Council had seen its IT costs increase. Every year it purchased and installed more and more PCs to equip its 1500 employees. And every year the cost of supporting these PCs grew higher and higher. The council's in-house IT support team was burdened with high volumes of support calls and needed to make frequent and time-consuming PC repairs.

“We were more reactive than proactive,” says Ian Kendall, server support and development manager at Ceredigion Council. “We spent all our time rushing around fixing PC problems and didn't have the time to innovate and plan strategically for the future.”

With users based at offices, schools, libraries, leisure centres and residential homes all over the county, the IT support team spent a lot of time travelling between sites. Understandably, this slowed the team's speed of response. “It was an inefficient use of time,” observes Kendall.

A NEW IT STRATEGY

Ceredigion Council recognised that its IT support function was one area where it had to make improvements in efficiency, so it formulated an entirely new IT strategy, which would reduce the costs associated with buying, maintaining and supporting PCs.

In place of desktop PCs, it started to invest instead in Wyse thin clients and connected multiple users to shared servers. As well as being much less expensive to purchase, the thin clients had the advantage of being more reliable and easier to maintain. Key applications were loaded onto shared servers where they could be accessed by multiple concurrent users.

The council ran six different UNIX-based financial solutions, which users accessed via an aging terminal emulation software package. As this terminal emulation package was becoming unreliable, the council decided to conduct a search for a new solution. It carried out a thorough evaluation of the products available on the market and assessed their cost effectiveness in particular.

As a result of this process, it selected a product from Ericom's PowerTerm® suite of solutions. “We found that Ericom offered the features we required along with the best value for money and high levels of support,” says Kendall.

Through its discussions with Ericom about the PowerTerm solutions, Ceredigion Council soon found out about Ericom's PowerTerm WebConnect Enterprise product.

This solution delivered all of the UNIX terminal emulation capabilities that the council required, and also offered easy access to server-based Windows applications. “As soon as we saw it working, we were convinced it would improve the efficiency of the IT support function,” says Kendall. “The solution was very easy to install and we were soon up and running.”

A SEAMLESS INTERFACE FOR USERS

Ericom's PowerTerm solutions have now become a core component of Ceredigion's new IT strategy. They are already used by over 130 employees and the roll-out to further users continues. While some employees only require access to UNIX-based financial solutions, other users are taking advantage of the full capabilities of PowerTerm WebConnect Enterprise to connect to an array of UNIX- and Windows-based applications through a single user interface.

Pressure on local councils to improve efficiency has never been greater.

A recent review, conducted for the government by Sir Peter Gershon, has placed the back-office functions of all public sector organisations under close scrutiny. To meet new government targets, all local councils are now required to make efficiencies both to improve service levels and to free up funds for front-line activities.



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Kendall is particularly impressed by the 'seamless mode' of operation offered by PowerTerm WebConnect Enterprise. This feature presents all of the application icons that users need on one desktop in the same format, regardless of whether these applications are UNIX- or Windows-based. "None of the applications are actually running on the person's machine, but it looks like they are," explains Kendall. "This makes it much easier and clearer for them."

“The installation time for complex packages has dropped from hours to minutes.”

Users have been pleased with the new easy-to-use screens and experience no degradation in performance. "PowerTerm WebConnect is a very simple but powerful solution," adds Kendall. "It just sits there and gets on with the job."

As the applications are located centrally on the server, troubleshooting problems has become a much more straightforward task. The IT support team can trace many user problems back to the server and correct them there. Users do not have to wait days for a technician to visit them. "We really have improved our service," says Kendall.

A FASTER SUPPORT SERVICE

PowerTerm WebConnect makes it very easy for the IT department to provide users with access to new applications. The team simply creates a new icon on the user's desktop with a URL link to the server. The whole process is so simple it can be done over the telephone.

Previously, it could take hours to install new applications on user PCs – or days if travel to another site was involved. "We have six applications in particular, including a key reporting package, that are very complicated and time consuming to install," explains Kendall. "Now we simply drop an icon onto a desktop, which allows the user to access the relevant server, and the job is done. The installation time for complex packages has dropped from hours to minutes."

Despite the large number of user sites across the county, Ceredigion Council has discovered that it can now address many of its user requests and problems centrally. The IT technicians are travelling less, which means that they are more efficient and save money on travel expenses.

WHAT GETS MEASURED, GETS IMPROVED

Ceredigion Council monitors the performance of its IT support function with monthly and quarterly statistics on how promptly user requests are addressed. As a result, it is in no doubt about the success of the initiative. The figures from the last quarter show a clear and steady improvement in response times. "It's a very positive trend," says Kendall.

A MORE EFFICIENT DEPARTMENT

Ericom's PowerTerm solutions have undoubtedly played a key role in helping the IT support department to become more efficient and the solutions feature prominently in the council's future IT plans. "Looking forwards, we may use WebConnect as a secure gateway to applications

and files for remote users," says Kendall. "It would provide a more secure and lower risk alternative to a separate Virtual Private Network.

At present, the Ericom solutions are primarily used by council employees in the finance department for managing council tax revenues, benefits payments, payroll and other financial services. However, Kendall believes that the versatility of the solution makes it appropriate for many more departments. "It could be used to great effect across the whole authority," he says. "We see huge potential to use the PowerTerm WebConnect solution widely within the council."

Ceredigion Council has been very pleased with the high levels of support, which it has received from Ericom, and is confident that the company will be able to continue to support its future plans. "The team has been very helpful and friendly and is always prepared to go the extra mile," notes Kendall.

The PowerTerm WebConnect Enterprise solution can expand to meet Ceredigion Council's changing requirements over time. Today, the council has around ten Windows-based applications that are accessible via the servers in addition to six UNIX-based financial applications – and it can add to these whenever it needs to.

"We have significantly reduced the support time per head, for those users with PowerTerm WebConnect, and so plan to extend the solution to at least 100 more users as soon as we can," concludes Kendall. "We are delighted with what we have achieved and look forward to further efficiency gains in the future." ■

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