Canadian Forces (Afghanistan)

Userful Desktop Boosts Morale of Canadian
Soldiers in Afghanistan.

Background

Connecting Afghanistan to the World.

After successfully building a country-wide communications network in Afghanistan, Userful's customer, a Canadian communications company, was tasked to provide state-of-the-art Internet and telephone service for allied service personnel in Afghanistan. Studies and experience demonstrate that giving soldiers the ability to instantly and reliably connect to family and friends day-to-day, and more critically during times of added stress, has a greater positive impact on morale than any other single factor.

Challenges

Userful's customer faced challenges even more fundamental than the absence of infrastructure. The Afghan climate is very extreme with regular high winds, temperatures routinely exceeding 100 degrees, and lots of sand--notoriously bad for electronics. Combined with the need for state-of-the-art security integration without compromising security on the larger communications network, and the need to protect the privacy of the soldiers, the result is one of the hardest possible testing grounds for an Internet Kiosk.

Before deploying Userful Desktop, the communications company's staff were constantly patching and upgrading individual Windows PCs separately. Without a time management system or integrated log-on, each user's personal communications were open to the indiscriminate gaze of other users. The Project Team Leader, and the rest of the morale, voice, and Internet service team also faced high bandwidth costs due to the constant need to remotely upgrade and re-image machines. The tension between usability and security was leading to exponentially increasing support time, costs, and reduced stability; none of which were tolerable in the field.

Solution

The Project Team Leader found Userful at a conference in Calgary. He recalls, "I immediately saw how well this system could serve my customers while reducing deployment and support complexities to an absolute minimum. Providing as many as ten Internet terminals from a single PC greatly reduces the risks, costs and complexities involved with shipping and setting up a kiosk."

After a demonstration of the system for his team, the Project Team Leader was very impressed: "Userful's approach results in less maintenance on computers, less space required for deployment, a minimized need for network infrastructure, less equipment to secure, and a huge reduction in energy consumption for computers and air conditioning. Add to this the fact that Userful provides all the low level support and you have a complete and nearly maintenance free public computing system."

Userful's team custom configured Userful Desktop systems with multiple fans, rugged cases, and enhanced air filtration for the communications company's demanding military deployment. Userful also integrated the customer's authentication database and access card platform with Userful Desktop's time management system to provide secure logins, track and control usage, and automatically log off unattended sessions. Userful even expanded support during Afghanistan's daylight hours, ensuring that if there was an issue, support would be able to address their concerns immediately.

Results

While some soldiers expressed initial hesitation with the switch to Userful Desktop, the results have exceeded expectations. Users find the system intuitive, easy to use, and vastly more reliable and functional than the computers Userful Desktop replaced. They send email, chat online, and even watch some of life's most special moments unfold in front of their eyes through the use of remote multimedia applications.

The Project Team Leader was delighted to discover that the system's stability, ease of administration, remote troubleshooting, and Userful's support allows Userful Desktop to be quickly deployed and maintained without dedicated IT staff. As the communications company's Project Team Leader puts it, "the impressive stability, ease of use, and exceptional support provided by Userful has improved the stability and success of the IT mission in Afghanistan. This translates directly into a life and death level of improvement of morale of allied soldiers and allows them to fulfill their critical missions with focus and confidence that their loved ones are with them every step of the way."

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> - Name Withheld for Troop Security Project Team Leader

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