Sunlight Service Group

Sunlight Service Learns to Install Own Mesh

ORGANIZATION
The Sunlight Service Group Ltd.

LOCATION
Basingstoke, Hampshire
United Kingdom

INDUSTRY
Textile rental and laundering services

PURPOSE
Enabler for deployment of
new business systems

SOLUTION
Firetide Multi-Service Mesh Network

MORE INFORMATION
• Sunlight Service Group, Ltd.
   www.sunlight.co.uk
• Siracom (Firetide distributor)
   www.siracom.com

When The Sunlight Service Group Ltd planned the deployment of a new enterprise resource planning system the age and construction of some of the 106 year old company's laundry plants proved to be an unexpected barrier to installation. Faced with significant require-ments for services in areas where no data infrastructure previously existed, they researched solutions based on new technology rather embark on costly, time consuming and disruptive cabling.

Sunlight is the leading supplier of textile rental and laundering services in the United Kingdom. It is one of several operating companies of the publicly held Davis Service Group Plc, which has revenues of approximately 660 million pounds (U.S. $1.23 billion). Sunlight provides a variety of textile rental and laundering services, including linen, workwear, mats and washroom equipment, to over 70,000 organisations including hotels, hospitals, industrial companies and the public sector. More than a million working people wear Sunlight garments everyday.

Big Companies Foster Bright Ideas

Sunlight's size enables it to make significant investments in technology to continually improve product quality and delivery. The new ERP system is a strategic deployment for Sunlight. It will be deployed to more than a thousand employees at over 50 sites across the UK and will consolidate disparate IT systems, improve efficiency, and reduce cost.

The focus on improving efficiency and reducing cost were key in choosing wireless mesh over re-cabling. Sunlight has not only learned the business benefits of deploying wireless mesh but also how to save money by installing mesh networks itself with in-house staff.

"Our laundries are large industrial plants, and as we have been in the industry for over 100 years, some of the properties are quite old," said Jeff Roberts, Sunlight's Applications Support Manager.

The plants are filled with huge machines. They are busy places with workers and laundry constantly on the move. A key issue was "how do you deploy new workstations, with network connectivity, in un-cabled areas, without disruption to the workplace?"

"Cabling is difficult, expensive, disruptive and inflexible," Roberts said. "We chose Firetide wireless mesh networks because they are simple and quick to implement and can easily be extended, moved or removed. In many instances they cost less to install than cabling."

One Mesh Fits All

So far Firetide networks have already been deployed at four Sunlight sites requiring between 3 and 13 nodes per site. Sunlight used Firetide's HotPort indoor wireless mesh nodes eliminating the need to install long runs of fibre and copper cabling throughout the facili-ties. Each mesh node has four Ethernet ports for connecting network devices. Sunlight have deployed bar code scanners, printers, and thin client terminals. The mesh proved effective for office and business users as well as laundry-specific applications.

"The Firetide mesh fully integrates with our wired networks. We purchase wireless mesh where cabling would be more costly, difficult, dangerous or too time-consuming to install. It is also useful for temporary locations or if mobility is required," Roberts said.

The wireless mesh has more than enough bandwidth for Sunlight's centralized computing architecture which uses central Citrix Termi-nal Servers to service remote Windows Terminals via the corporate managed WAN.

Bringing the Installation Home

Siracom, Firetide's UK distributor, trained Sunlight engineers to install their own wireless mesh systems. The in-house engineering staff has been trained to configure the systems and been given suf-ficient back grounding in RF to enable them to correctly position the mesh nodes and antennae.

"We have fairly standard configurations and usually the only changes required are site IDs and IP addresses. Since the company operates large facilities with little wireless traffic in the vicinity, all the devices at a site can operate on a single channel and complex site surveys aren't required," Roberts said.

Firetide mesh networks are quickly deployed. They are self-heal-ing in addition to self-forming. The four Ethernet ports on each node can also be used for a variety of other devices, including video surveillance cameras and Wi-Fi access points. Firetide's proprietary network protocol automatically discovers and adds new nodes to the mesh network. The system also allows for an instant redirection of data should a link become disabled or if an obstruction suddenly blocks line-of-sight. Redundant paths keep data traffic flowing between nodes despite any issues with a particular link.

Managing the Future

Sunlight supports its Datacentre, ServiceDesk and network opera-tions from corporate headquarters in Basingstoke (to the west of London). Engineers use Firetide's HotView Pro software to enable central management of all the meshes at the various sites and to ensure wireless signal strength and quality are within tolerance.

Sunlight knows the laundry business well, and the company has had ample opportunity to improve it during the last century. Today it has embraced another new technology — wireless mesh network-ing — helping it to remain efficient and competitive as it enters its second hundred years.