

Case Study: Comcast Corporation

Streamlined, reliable access drives strategic field-service initiative. *With 23.9 million cable customers, Comcast Corporation is one of the nation's leading providers of entertainment, information and communication products and services. In order to fulfill promises to customers for timely service, the company embarked on an ambitious initiative as part of its "Dream Big" campaign. Reliable application access for field technicians was central to the effort – which is why NetMotion Mobility XE was the centerpiece of the mobile deployment.*

About the Deployment

Comcast needed to extend direct access to applications to its field technicians, to improve customer service. "Our credo continues to evolve and is focused on customer satisfaction," declares Greg Otto, senior director of infrastructure and operations. "As an example, the Comcast Dream Big initiative includes a customer guarantee that we're going to keep the appointment, be on time and be there when convenient for our customers. Absolutely, the critical element is clean and consistent access to our applications. That's the bedrock for the change."

Comcast has deployed approximately 18,000 wireless handhelds, the majority of them MC70 devices from Motorola, to support its technicians nationwide. Connecting via a cellular data network, the handhelds access one of two application suites that Comcast uses across its various markets. For authentication, data encryption and to maintain the reliable application access that is a fundamental requirement, Comcast installed the NetMotion Mobility XE mobile VPN.

Critical Issue: Application Persistence

The need for the Mobility XE VPN first surfaced during a pilot deployment in Baltimore. Even though the area is fairly robust for cellular coverage, the technicians were having problems with dropped connections. They were forced to repeatedly restart, then re-navigate through the applications to pick up where they left off and re-enter data. This wasn't just a productivity drain, but a potential roadblock for the entire system.

"It's a lot of change, taking a group that has historically been paper-based for many years and giving them electronic devices," says Otto. "We were coming from paper-based forms and calls into the dispatch center, and going to an automated process where they have the capabilities in their own hands to support customer needs. You could have all kinds of interesting scenarios, so session persistence was key." Deploying Mobility XE quickly solved the problem, by allowing the application sessions to persist despite interrupted connections. This became even more important as the deployment went nationwide and extended into rural areas.

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– Greg Otto, Senior Director,
Infrastructure and Operations



Organization

Comcast Corporation

Industry

Entertainment, information and communication services

Objectives

- Improve customer service through on-time appointments
- Extend reliable application delivery to field technicians
- Streamline and simplify access
- Enforce security

Solution

- Mobility XE mobile VPN
- Motorola MC70 handhelds
- National cellular data network
- CSG & Amdocs application suites
- Afaria systems management software

Results

- Improved on-time performance
- Simplified ingress/egress via two access points nationwide
- Reliable performance through application persistence

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Access to Every Application, from Anywhere

Comcast serves markets all across the U.S. To further complicate matters, it uses two separate application providers who each furnish a suite of dispatch, provisioning, customer-service and billing applications. But their architectures are quite different. Explains Otto, "One is CSG, and that's a Web service. The other is Amdocs, which runs off servers in our data center and has a fat client pushed down to the device.

"Some of our divisions use both providers. It's important for the field technicians to have the same kind of access method for each of them. We also wanted to simplify and streamline the ingress and egress into our environment — we didn't want to have connection points throughout the entire network. So we use Mobility XE in an active/active, primary/secondary configuration in our data center, to provide two access points that are highly available. We only have to manage and secure two access points, to handle the logons and connectivity to applications and services from anywhere in the country."

Efficient Management and Updates

For a deployment the size of Comcast, efficient device management is a must, "We have 18,000 handhels deployed, and we're going to grow that to 25,000," says Otto. "From an access-management standpoint, Mobility XE is a pretty light touch. Once we get the devices activated and deployed in the field, the integration is pretty seamless." For operating system and application updates, Mobility XE co-exists with Afaia from Sybase iAnywhere, which allows the IT staff to push out updates and stage them so they don't disrupt the technicians.

"With Mobility XE, we only have to manage and secure two access points, to handle the logons and connectivity to applications and services from anywhere in the country."

Measurable Results, Delivered

"This is definitely a strategic initiative for Comcast," declares Otto. "There are some key operational metrics, for example shift variance which has to do with scheduling of the technicians from a field workforce standpoint, and missed appointments — making sure we're on time with our customers.

"The key to getting there was connecting technicians to our applications through a secure, reliable method. That's the big piece of the problem that Mobility XE solves for us."

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