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SECURE WIRELESS INFRASTRUCTURE HELPS ACTIONAID INTERNATIONAL FULFIL HUMANITARIAN MISSION WHILE STAYING WITHIN BUDGET
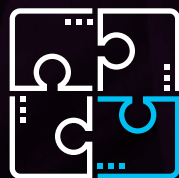
— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY —

ActionAid

International wing of human rights charity serving 45 countries

Challenge

Increase IT efficiency within a reduced budget

Improve network security and performance

Enable worldwide operations to communicate better

Solution

Professional services for network architecture and implementation

Design and deployment of Cisco Meraki wireless network

Ongoing consultancy, technology roadmap and deployment services

Results

Stronger IT governance, control and security

Faster, more reliable communications for users

Improved collaboration supports charitable endeavours

CHALLENGE

Fighting against poverty and injustice is the global mission of ActionAid but, with donation levels falling, the job's getting harder. Consequent cutbacks have hit every part of its operations. IT isn't immune from that.

Even before those constraints, modernising IT services was front of mind. Dina Megchiani, international infrastructure manager, says: "We had to make efficiency gains along with a centralised IT planning and management model."

About 3000 ActionAid International workers improve the lives of 15 million people across 45 countries. The networking systems and resources available to them were variable. Most offices have wireless connectivity; a few have fixed networks too. In the absence of an overarching strategy, local teams make their own IT purchasing and support decisions.

There is no overview of the entire infrastructure, which impacts network security and performance. Diagnosing and fixing problems can be difficult. Employees bringing their own devices to work compounded issues.

Devendra Shrestha, regional IT manager, says: "We had no way of identifying if our bandwidth was being used by an employee's mobile phone, an ActionAid-provided device or an external guest user."

Core applications like the charity's donor ship platform, document management system, intranet and email run in the charity's London data centre. Users access information and applications through internet-based VPNs, but service levels were unpredictable for many countries outside of Europe who widely-used collaborative tools like Skype for Business and Vidyo conferencing.
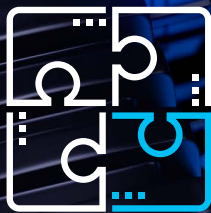
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SOLUTION

ActionAid chose Creative ITC as its advisory and implementation partner. Input from the Creative professional services team helped ActionAid define a strategy, clarify its needs and validate the final decision.

Dina recalls: **"From day one, Creative was fully engaged with our requirements and focused on finding a solution right for us."** That solution was a Cisco Meraki wireless infrastructure. Cloud-managed from a central dashboard, the core devices are Meraki MX84 and MX64 firewalls. Meraki MR32 wireless access points were also installed.

The Meraki portal automatically feeds up-to-date information and reports to the IT team so, for the first time, network visibility and the means to take immediate action are available.

Bangkok, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe were first to install the new infrastructure. Creative ITC managed the deployment, working with local IT teams. Low-level plans were produced, mapping old and new topologies to make the transition easier.

"It was important that Creative is a truly global organisation," says Devendra. "Its consultants and engineers did a great job working remotely with local IT staff in each country, and were always on hand to clarify matters and answer our questions."

RESULTS:

✔ With greater network visibility comes tighter security. The local IT team can monitor events and see potential threats. They can see who's connecting to the network and how bandwidth or other resources are being used.

✔ IT can split tunnels within the Meraki firewalls to separate internal users from external guests and devices. There's traffic prioritisation for internal users, while guest internet access has been capped. Content filtering defines boundaries as IT governance takes a firmer hold.

✔ Users are getting better network performance and internet connectivity. When issues arise, they're handled quickly. Across the board, IT is managing its resources more effectively. For example, prior to the Meraki installation, four engineers had worked a number of hours over three months on network issues in Nairobi.

✔ With Meraki, one person resolved the matter in two hours. Unexplained dips in Nairobi broadband speeds were traced to their root cause. The dashboard showed Skype and Vidyo conferencing taking bandwidth to its contractual limit and bringing traffic to a halt. Armed with that data, an alternative tariff is being negotiated with the service provider.

✔ Flexibility – so critical to this diverse operation – has greatly increased. There's remote management for offices that don't have IT people on site. Five IT co-ordinators in multiple global locations allocate 20 percent of their time to assisting regional offices. They're able to step in with proactive support when local people are unavailable.

✔ Creative ITC consultants are continuing to provide insights into new technologies and critical areas like security. This includes advising ActionAid on a technology refresh and opportunities to reduce data centre overheads.

✔ A positive return on investment is expected by the end of the first year. It's hoped a global deployment will follow. That would multiply the benefits, while economies of scale would make budgets go even further.

✔ Dina concludes: **"Our goal is to make the IT service a proactive partner rather than a firefighting unit. Spending less time on user support enables us to work on projects that directly contribute to our charitable aims."**

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Dina Megchiani,
International Infrastructure Manager, ActionAid

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