

Google Apps helps City of Seattle increase security and improve employee productivity



BUSINESS



Company: City of Seattle, Washington

Location: Seattle, Washington

Industry: Government

Users: 11,000 city government employees and elected officials

Challenges: The City of Seattle's existing spam filtering solution was completely ineffective and was actually becoming worse: users were spending too much time deleting spam from their inboxes and retrieving 'good' mail from their spam folder.

Results: After a phased rollout to ensure its success, Google Message Security has helped the City of Seattle see an improvement in productivity, both in the IT organization as well as among its 11,000 users.

“The move to Google Message Security has helped reduce the amount of time required to tweak and manage our spam filtering solution, thereby increasing the overall productivity of the IT department.”

Michael Hamilton

Chief Information Security Officer

Challenge

The largest city in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle, Washington, is also one of the most technologically savvy cities in the nation. With Microsoft, Amazon.com, Expedia, and other software giants calling Seattle home, the city government is on the cutting edge of using technology itself. It was one of the first cities in the country to create and host a website, and so doing, open itself up to security threats. The Public Records Act only exacerbated the problem. Says Michael Hamilton, Chief Information Security Officer for the City of Seattle, “It’s a well-known fact that address harvesting bots move around the Internet all the time and, because we’re required to expose our contact information online, our email addresses are available for anyone to see and use for spam purposes.”

The address harvesting bots were sending an ever-greater volume of spam to city email addresses – and the city’s existing spam protection solution wasn’t catching the illegitimate messages. “Quite a bit of spam was eluding the solution and making it to our users’ inboxes. We were at 80 to 90 percent unwanted email,” recalls Hamilton. “All departments in the city government – with more than 11,000 users throughout downtown Seattle – were centrally served by our old spam protection solution and, frankly, it was a huge security risk and a significant productivity drain. We knew we had to make a change.”

Solution

After evaluating a variety of approaches, including updated appliances similar to the city’s existing solution as well as managed services hosted by a third-party provider, Hamilton realized the labor and energy benefits of an on-demand, hosted service approach would be the right direction for the city. “With an outsourced spam filtering solution, we could protect our users from spam without increasing employee overhead – and reduce our overall energy consumption by decommissioning the existing servers.”

“Google helps us reduce the number of ways hackers and other malicious individuals can reach city employees with trick attachments and links, thereby compromising our security. Because these emails no longer even make it through to our server, we feel much more secure.”

Hamilton then conducted extensive research on the top two managed spam filtering services and, to his delight, found that Google Message Security, powered by Postini, was on the General Services Administration (GSA) Schedule. Purchasing Google through a GSA distributor, Hamilton then set about implementing the solution across the wide variety of city departments – from public works personnel to elected officials. “We phased the rollout over nine months with quite a bit of handholding,” says Hamilton. “In local government, it’s critically important to implement new technology with a lot of communication to each individual department to make the transition as smooth as possible.”

ABOUT GOOGLE APPS SECURITY AND COMPLIANCE

Google Apps security and compliance products, powered by Postini, are available to businesses and organizations who want to make their existing email infrastructures more secure, compliant, and productive. The message security products protect you from spam and messaging threats. The compliance products enable you to enforce message policy and content management, archive messages with discovery services, as well as secure your web browsing and encrypt your sensitive email. As a service, there is nothing to install or maintain, so you can start small and implement additional services as your requirements grow.

For more information, visit
www.google.com/a/security

Benefits

Thanks to Google Message Security, the City of Seattle has been able to increase its security and reduce its 'threat surface'. Says Hamilton, "Google helps us reduce the number of ways hackers and other malicious individuals can reach city employees with trick attachments and links, thereby compromising our security. Because these emails no longer even make it through to our users, we feel much more secure."

The Google solution has had a productivity impact as well. "Thanks to the effectiveness of Google Message Security, our users spend less time purging their email inboxes of erroneously delivered messages and more time focusing on their job responsibilities," notes Hamilton. "And, due to the simple yet powerful configurability of each individual user's spam settings, we've been able to transfer a significant amount of responsibility for filtering to the users rather than our IT organization."

Since implementing Google Message Security, the City's IT organization has also been more productive. Rather than managing individual users' spam filters and helping city employees clean out inboxes overflowing with email that should have been filtered out by the existing spam filtering solution, "the two staffers responsible for managing our old solution now handle not only all the interaction between the city and Google, but also have time to take on non-security-related activities as well," notes Hamilton. "The move to Google Message Security has helped reduce the amount of time required to tweak and manage our spam filtering solution, thereby increasing the overall productivity of the IT department."

Finally, with the on-demand, hosted approach of Google, the City of Seattle has been able to reduce its energy footprint. Comments Hamilton, "We have decreased the number of servers we have running in the data center because Google hosts the application for us. The success of the outsourced model in general – and Google Message Security in particular – has led us to evaluate hosted applications to meet our other IT requirements."

Results

In real productivity terms, Hamilton estimates his time savings in this way: "If you have 10,000 users that spend a few minutes per day going through their email inboxes and cleaning out spam that's either marked or unmarked as spam but made it past the filter anyway, you get about several hundred hours a day. When you take an average hourly pay rate and calculate out the lost productivity in dollar terms, it's a big number. And that's what we're saving by using Google – the daily digests reduce those few minutes to five seconds."

When asked to summarize his experience with Google Message Security, Hamilton says, "Our users are ecstatic about Google because their spam problem has gone away. Not only do they not complain any more, but also we, as a city, have seen our overall threat surface shrink. As a CISO and champion of the solution, that's important, because it's helped the overall image of IT as an effective, efficient organization."

