

BUYER CASE STUDY

BuyerPulse Buyer Case Study: Grand Island Public Schools Implements Identity Solution to Centralize Management and Increase Security

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IDC OPINION

Grand Island Public Schools (GIPS), a prekindergarten through grade 12 school district located in Grand Island, Nebraska, implemented the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution (Centrify User Suite, Mac Edition) to integrate the school system's fleet of Mac computers with Active Directory and provide unified access management, authorization, password management, and authentication capabilities. Transitioning away from a distributed and repetitive identity and access management (IAM) framework, Grand Island Public Schools' selection of Centrify involved the following key aspects:

- GIPS began evaluating IAM solutions in 2012 in response to organizational efficiency and security concerns.
- Centralized management capabilities and enhanced security were core requirements for the school system.
- GIPS decided to unify its numerous, distributed Open Directory domains and standardize on a single Active Directory domain.
- The school district's implementation of Centrify for Mac and Mobile was completed quickly and was easily adopted by in-house system administrators and other IT resources.

IN THIS BUYER CASE STUDY

This IDC Buyer Case Study examines how Grand Island Public Schools, a school district located in Nebraska, selected Centrify's Mac and Mobile solution for integration into a centralized IAM framework to handle authorization and authentication districtwide.

For this IDC Buyer Case Study, we interviewed Cory Gearhart, executive director of Technology at Grand Island Public Schools.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Organization Overview

Grand Island Public Schools is a prekindergarten through grade 12 school district located in Grand Island, Nebraska. The school system has approximately 9,000 students and 1,500 staff members, including certified teachers and support staff. GIPS operates 23 facilities across the community, including 14 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, a high school, a preschool, and several alternative facilities providing technical programs and administrative services. The city of Grand Island is located in Hall County in Nebraska and has a population of approximately 50,000.

Cory Gearhart, executive director of Technology at GIPS, shared his experiences with IDC around the selection and implementation process of the Centrify software. Gearhart also offered a glimpse into the district's plans going forward from a technology perspective.

Challenges and Solution

Challenges

Prior to 2012, GIPS had no central IAM framework, relying on system administrators at each of the school system's individual locations to provide directory services and manage access rights. After joining GIPS in early 2012, Gearhart quickly identified several key areas where IAM capabilities could be used to enhance the school system's security around public records and help ensure the confidentiality of its user base. In addition to being redundant, the school system's existing approach also lacked central or district-level oversight regarding access management, policy controls, and password management. Concerned about this gap in management capabilities, Gearhart began to push for the introduction of a unified IAM solution that could offer added security and control to GIPS' management of identities and administration of access rights. Before implementing a new IAM solution, Gearhart also needed to make sure that a cohesive directory service was in place at GIPS, one capable of supporting the school system's 10,000 users and 5,400 computers (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Buyer Case Study Capsule

Category	Details
Vendor/product	Centrify for Mac and Mobile (Centrify User Suite, Mac Edition)
User organization	Grand Island Public Schools
Vertical	Education
Size	~10,000 users
Purchase trigger/need	Develop a centralized and secure IAM framework across the school system's various sites
Key tech requirements	Mac compatibility, Mac and AD integration
Short list	Centrify, Atempo, GroupLogic, LANrev, Parallels, Thursby Software
Key win factors	Ease of implementation, AD integration capabilities, centralized management framework
Decision cycle time	90 days
Implementation time	3 weeks

Source: IDC, August 2013

Key Requirements: Centralized Identity and Access Management and Security

Prior to Gearhart's arrival, GIPS had independent directory services at each of its academic and administrative sites. To improve upon this distributed setup and improve the organizational efficiency of the school system, Gearhart wanted to establish a centralized approach to the management of identity, access, password management, and authentication. Having a centralized system was also an important prerequisite for the school system's goal of providing single sign-on (SSO) services and digital content curriculum systems across the organization's 23 sites.

In addition to providing centralized control, Gearhart believed that a new IAM solution would help ensure a basic level of security at GIPS that was absent in the existing model. Joining GIPS after nearly a decade in the healthcare industry, Gearhart determined that the security of privileged data and records at the school system was an important objective that GIPS could easily address as part of the new approach to IAM.

Selection

To introduce centralized IAM capabilities, GIPS had to first develop a unified directory service. When the project was initiated, GIPS had approximately 5,000 Mac computers and was running 23 distributed Open Directory domains. While moving to a single Open Directory domain appeared to be the most logical and obvious solution, Gearhart was concerned with issues related to server hardware and application support. To ensure the reliability and security of the directory component of the new approach, GIPS decided to standardize on Microsoft's Active Directory.

Once the decision to use Active Directory had been made, the school system needed a tool that would enable the Mac computers to authenticate with Active Directory and allow administrators to manage preferences and policy as well as control authorizations. One possible solution that the organization considered using was a combination of Active Directory and Open Directory, which is commonly referred to as a "golden triangle" or "magic triangle" setup. Gearhart was skeptical about the efficacy of this method because of the lack of formal support for the solution, as well as the possibility that it would require substantial time commitments from technical staff when they were already utilized to capacity, and opted to enter the marketplace.

After making the strategic decision to engage with an IAM vendor, GIPS initiated a formal evaluation and approval process. To aid in the selection, Gearhart consulted a variety of sources, including the input of educational industry professionals, educational industry publications, and personal online research. As part of this research process, GIPS became aware of the Enterprise Desktop Alliance (EDA), a group of vendors, including Centrify, that were working together to jointly promote the availability and adoption of solutions aimed at facilitating the integration and management of Mac computers with Windows-based products and solutions. In addition to Centrify, GIPS considered solutions from Thursby Software as well as solutions offered by other members of the EDA, including Atempo, GroupLogic, Absolute Manage (formerly LANrev), and Parallels.

Solution

According to Gearhart, while evaluating possible solutions, Centrify "kept coming to the top," and GIPS began to view the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution as the most comprehensive and robust product in the marketplace. Other solutions that the school system considered offered "parts and pieces" of the necessary functionality but could not match the rich functionality and features of the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution. One major differentiator for the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution was its holistic and easy-to-use management framework that would enable administrators to control preferences, handle authentications, administer policies, and provide single sign-on capabilities. Another important consideration was the solution's marked ease of implementation and ability to be easily integrated and connected with Active Directory.

Implementation

Led primarily by a single, dedicated system administrator, the school system completed the installation, demo, testing, and initial setup of the new Centrify solution in less than two weeks. To support this process, GIPS involved the help of an in-

house Apple system administrator who explained the interoperation of the new Centrify product with the existing Mac computers. Having the in-house Apple systems administrator helped the more PC-focused staff to become familiar with the language/syntax of the new solution and to learn how to manage preferences and control authorizations and authentications. Following the initial setup and testing, the implementation team took approximately one week to develop policies aimed at controlling end-user devices at the school system.

Before the project was initiated, GIPS' various sites were connected back to the main administrative building through fibers, which varied from anywhere between 10Mb and 1Gb. As part of the implementation, GIPS enhanced the network connectivity at selected sites and ensured a minimum fiber bandwidth of at least 100Mb for all of its academic and administrative sites.

Results

GIPS experienced a fast implementation that addressed all 23 facilities in approximately 3 weeks. The implementation was largely seamless and free from technical error and delays, in part due to the organization's decision to prioritize ease of implementation and ease of integration during the selection process.

Benefits

After the new solution was fully implemented, system administrators at GIPS found that the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution offered a streamlined management framework for the school system's Mac devices that proved to be very similar to how Windows' computers are usually managed. This familiarity and ease of use allowed IT resources at the school system to quickly gain control of the new solution. Internal knowledge of Active Directory and Windows-based systems at GIPS helped the organization dive directly into managing policy changes and authorizations without the need for extensive exposure to the new product.

The project also delivered observable and direct benefits to both staff and students within the school system. As part of the implementation, end users were given a single set of log-in credentials that has enabled secure access and SSO capabilities with a range of applications and devices, including computers, email, and other educational resources. The new system also helped GIPS integrate with Infinite Campus, a student information system (SIS) that provides a streamlined way for educators and administrators to disseminate academic material and other information to students and community members.

Another source of success for the project was dependable service and support provided by the vendor. "Centrify has been a solid partner that helped us achieve our short- and long-term goals of unified authorization and authentication for our cross-platform computing. They've exceeded our expectations in regard to the level of service, and obviously, we look forward to continuing that partnership," Gearhart stated. When minor problems did arise, Centrify was able to provide fast and effective solutions to the organization.

The inherent usability of the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution complemented the in-house skill set at GIPS and ensured a streamlined changeover at the school system. The software has also served as a powerful tool in helping GIPS gain the central oversight and security it originally required. Since deployment, GIPS has been wholly autonomous in the management and administration of its new IAM framework.

Lessons Learned

During implementation, GIPS did experience one noteworthy issue with a certain functionality of the Centrify solution. However, Centrify quickly resolved the problem by delivering a solution to GIPS in approximately one day. "I have worked with very large, global software vendors in the past. I was just astonished, quite frankly, at how well they accommodated that," Gearhart stated.

The biggest challenges associated with the project were not with the Centrify product but rather had to do with change management and configuration of the school system's IT infrastructure. One source of pushback was from internal IT resources at the school system's various sites, some of which were hesitant to relinquish control. GIPS also observed a certain degree of dissatisfaction from staff and students who were required to change their log-in credentials as part of the migration. This frustration and pushback was ultimately offset by the benefits that end users received from having a single set of log-in credentials that allowed them to access computers, email, and a newly integrated student information system.

GIPS experienced some delays and technical issues associated with its management of internal file servers. As part of the changeover, the school system decided to switch to Windows file servers in order to support the new Centrify solution. This resulted in technical issues in conjunction with the existing Apple file servers and caused observable delays as users were logging in to the systems.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Standardizing on a single directory service and implementing a centralized framework to handle access management, authorizations, password management, and policy controls represented a substantial and ambitious undertaking for GIPS. Currently, the school system is focused on addressing smaller projects and making minor alterations to the new solution. One definite objective on the organization's road map is to upgrade to the most recent version of the Centrify for Mac and Mobile product in order to obtain additional features and functionality.

A longer-term goal for GIPS involves incorporating additional SSO services with the existing software to provide its user base with access to applications that cannot currently be integrated with Active Directory. Centrify has a product to address this need, and it is being considered by GIPS. However, as a publicly funded entity, GIPS believes a new competitive evaluation process will be required before a selection is made.

In future product updates, Gearhart would like to see Centrify offer a simpler way for having clients upgrade or update themselves within the product. He would also like to

see Centrify revise how the product handles group policy inheritance, perhaps modeled more along the lines of Active Directory.

ESSENTIAL GUIDANCE

Actions to Consider

While it has not necessarily been a traditional priority in the primary and secondary education space, GIPS' strategic decision to invest in the Centrify for Mac and Mobile solution has helped the school system establish a more secure, unified, and transparent framework for administering access management, policy controls, and authorizations.

Drawing on experience garnered from a nearly decade-long stint in the healthcare IT space, Gearhart brought a fresh perspective to GIPS that proved to be a unique source of success for the project. With cost as an obvious and pressing concern, Gearhart had to make a compelling case that a strategy of minimized expenditure opened the school system up to the possibility of replacing one inadequate system with another. Gearhart's insistence on standardizing on Active Directory and partnering with an established vendor ultimately resulted in a comprehensive new system that has delivered the full scope of capabilities and features that the school system required.

LEARN MORE

Related Research

- ☒ *BuyerPulse Buyer Case Study: McKesson Utilizing Open Source IAM: Benefits in Cost, Customization, and Integration* (IDC #242405, July 2013)
- ☒ *Worldwide Identity and Access Management 2012 Vendor Shares* (IDC #241382, June 2013)
- ☒ *Worldwide Identity and Access Management 2013–2017 Forecast* (IDC #241685, June 2013)

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