

Problem Case Study || Education



Internet use is a part of a student's daily routine, in part because today's children have grown up with computers. Computers are integrated into their communication habits and are used as a tool to help students work more efficiently. The Internet provides a vast store of online knowledge and resources. Web access in the classroom has a dark side, however, when Internet use becomes Internet abuse. This was undoubtedly the rationale behind the E-Rate stipulation that requires participating schools to monitor or filter objectionable content on networks that serve students.

It was E-Rate funding concerns that initially caused PACE-Brantley Hall School, an independent, nonprofit, K-12 grade school, to search for a software program that would control what students and staff were doing on the school network. Says James Glase, network administrator for PACE-Brantley Hall School, "When we implemented our LAN, we opened up a huge door to the outside world, which allowed people in and out of our network transparently." Glase realized he needed to find a software solution that would safeguard the school network from abuse, while protecting the students who use the Internet for legitimate study purposes.

The Solution

Glase selected Pearl Echo.Suite in order to monitor the Internet activity of multiple PCs from a central location. Pearl Echo tracks most forms of Internet communications including web, e-mail, chat, instant messaging, file transfers and blog postings. Pearl Echo communicates network activity through reports that provide details such as the top Internet users on a network and the amount of time they spend online. Reports also show the most frequented web sites, e-mail transactions, postings, file transfers and chat groups. Furthermore, Pearl Echo's Quick-Link feature includes full content restoration of all inbound and outbound communications.

In addition to monitoring Internet activity, Pearl Echo can block users from visiting specified Internet content. PACE-Brantley Hall School, for example, uses the pre-configured Echo.Filters URL database, a module that categorizes websites and accompanies the purchase of Pearl Echo. Echo.Filters helps to block out offensive web sites from being viewed and allow web sites that are educational. With Pearl Echo, a network administrator can add, edit and delete web sites from Pearl Echo's control lists, as needed.



Success in the Field

Although Glase initially set up the software as a provision of the E-Rate program, he soon discovered that the school network was being used for activities that had nothing to do with school. Says Glase, "After we installed the software, we found out that peer-to-peer file sharing software and inappropriate movie clips were pretty popular with our students. Let's suffice to say that many of the sites being visited were anything but educational in nature."

Shortly after installing the software, two students decided to challenge the system. Despite signing a comprehensive, three-page Internet use agreement, Pearl Echo revealed that two students had tried to visit forbidden web sites. Despite a verbal warning, one of the students again violated the agreement and was subsequently expelled.

School administrators soon learned that Pearl Echo could also help alleviate the risk of potential legal liabilities. Soon after Pearl Echo was purchased, an incident occurred with a teacher accessing inappropriate web content and the teacher was quickly reprimanded. Without the monitoring software in place, the teacher's actions would have gone on unchecked and the school could have been liable if students or parents had complained about the teacher's online activities.

Although Glase finds Pearl Echo easy to use, he says it would be very difficult for students to hack. According to Glase, "When Pearl Echo is running on a computer, it is transparent to the user. Plus, the software resides on a restricted server so there is virtually no way a student could gain access to the system to disable the program."

Although students were obviously happier when they could freely roam the Web, PACE-Brantley Hall School administrators and parents now rest assured that there are controls in place to protect children online. Says Glase, "I'm not Big Brother. I'm just making sure the school network is used for what it was originally intended – helping children learn. There are some scary things out there. With Pearl Echo in place, we are more confident our students are safe while they surf at school."