

York Children's Aid Society is Fussing Less with Technology So It Can Do More to Help Children



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Background

When the pandemic hit, most organizations had to scramble to provide remote access for employees to enable work from home. But York Region Children's Aid Society (YCAS) in Newmarket, Ontario, had everything it needed to meet the challenges, thanks to Gibraltar Solutions and Citrix.

YCAS has been protecting children and building stronger families since the 1940s with 24/7 child protection services and support for family problem solving. In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, the agency served more than 12,500 children.

YCAS case workers and investigators are constantly on the road, travelling extensively throughout the York Region to respond to cases and work with families. While out of the office, they need convenient and reliable remote access to case documents. And, because YCAS staff work with highly confidential family information, storage, access, and retrieval must be secure.

Upgrading for Simplicity & Security

To meet its current needs and in anticipation of workforce growth, YCAS recently turned to Gibraltar Solutions to upgrade its computing environment to modernize security, improve connectivity, and simplify operations for IT. With less than five IT professionals to support 300 employees, the YCAS IT team runs lean, which means they need a stable environment with low overhead support. Troubleshooting, when needed, should be quick and easy, and tickets from users need to be minimal.

The organization also had concerns about data security. It was using an out-of-date version of Citrix Workspace for remote access, which worked well and didn't require much maintenance. But the software had aged beyond Citrix's support window, meaning the organization was behind in security updates. YCAS wanted a modernized security posture to protect against hackers and ransomware, which has become a real threat to government organizations.



To simplify operations, Gibraltar Solutions helped YCAS migrate its computing environment to an on-premises private cloud, which hosts the agency's applications and converges its computing, storage, and much of its networking into one system. Instead of managing three separate platforms, the agency now manages its environment through one interface, taking a significant load off the IT team for infrastructure management. Thanks to the new infrastructure, YCAS has minimal downtime due to infrastructure issues. Marco Lee, IT Manager at YCAS says, "Everything is more centralized, so it works much better."



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To provide better protection for sensitive data, YCAS asked Gibraltar Solutions to upgrade its Citrix Workspace platform to the current version, which also enables secure remote access from any device an employee has available, whether it be an agency-issued laptop or personal tablet or smartphone.

Citrix Workspace vs. VPN

A key benefit of Citrix for remote access is its ability to keep and hold a quality Internet connection. Before moving to Citrix about 12 years ago, the organization used virtual private networks (VPN) for secure remote access. While VPN provides secure access to the organizational network, there's no folder or file-level security without adding expensive and complex third-party extensions. Anyone who gains access to the network has free reign to explore any corporate resource, a security risk that YCAS can't afford. Internally, savvy users could bypass security settings to get access to nearly anything.

In addition, VPN can be very slow, especially if many people are using it to access the network or if users are working with large documents, a common scenario for YCAS employees. The agency stores its case documents going back to the mid-1900s in an electronic archive. Lee says, "Some cases are a couple thousand pages long. If we used VPN, that would be painfully slow."

And VPN is device-specific. If a user logs in from the wrong device, they don't get access, leading to support issues for IT. VPN also has high bandwidth requirements, so it can be finicky when it comes to maintaining a consistent Internet connection. If there's a glitch in connectivity, VPN can drop off, forcing the user to log back in. YCAS investigators and case workers are already dealing with highly complex family issues. The last thing they need is to stop work and submit a support ticket.

Lee says, "When we were on VPN, we often had many support tickets because a device isn't working, and VPN doesn't make it easy to set up a new device. Whereas now, when they're working from home, and especially with our after hours team, when someone calls at 10:00 P.M. and their device isn't working, with Citrix we can easily redirect them to use their personal computer and access work through their browser. So, it makes our support a lot easier and it's more flexible for our employees as well."

Citrix Workspace was designed for stable connectivity with the ability to handle slow or fickle connections without dropping the user off the network. As Citrix is device-agnostic, it provides access to the network and data based on user settings, not the device. If users have the Citrix Receiver or Citrix Workspace app installed on their devices, they can log into the network. As long as the user can get to a browser, they can work. If a laptop fails, users can resort to a smartphone or other device to access information.

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- Marco Lee, IT Manager at YCAS

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User-based Security for More Flexibility

Citrix provides the granular level of security that most organizations need to keep their data secure. With Citrix, YCAS can grant conditional access to data by user, a group of users, device, geography, or application. Even if an unauthorized user were to gain entry, it would be difficult to access sensitive data. It also keeps curious or disgruntled employees from accessing data they don't have permission to view or edit. By setting permissions by geography, YCAS can prevent criminals with stolen credentials from logging in from outside of Ontario.

At the device level, Citrix can interrogate a device to determine if it's a trusted endpoint. For example, it can check the device to ensure it has up-to-date antivirus software. If not, YCAS has the option to deny access or grant read-only access. The agency can also lock access to USB to prevent downloading sensitive information.

More Productivity, Fewer Support Tickets

With secure remote access enabled through Citrix, the YCAS IT team fields fewer support tickets because of Citrix's flexibility with devices and a more reliable connection. Because Citrix is designed for easy administration—and because the platform is extremely stable—the IT team spends less time on management and more time on mission-critical activities. Lee says, "I haven't heard any complaints for many months."

With the ability to configure security to meet its data privacy needs, YCAS has peace of mind that its data is secure and sensitive family information is accessible only by specific employees. The agency is also better positioned to attract younger workers who appreciate and expect up-to-date technology to do their work.

The benefits of Citrix Workspace came into focus when lockdowns were established as a result of the global pandemic. The agency went from about 20-30 people working remotely using Citrix to 100 percent of employees. Thankfully, the migration to its on-premises cloud and the Citrix upgrade put YCAS in a great position to quickly meet the challenges of the pandemic. Lee says,



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"Overnight, Citrix became our primary business tool. We were amazed at how easily we could mobilize the whole agency to work from home with a very short turnaround time with no major performance issues." Today, about 100 employees are connected remotely to YCAS through Citrix at any given time.

For more than a decade, Gibraltar Solutions has worked side-by-side with YCAS to provide reliable, cost-effective solutions to help the agency fulfill its mission to protect children, starting with its data centre, adding Citrix for remote access, and most recently, its upgrade to an on-premises private cloud and the current version of Citrix Workspace.

By staying close to YCAS throughout its growth and changes, Gibraltar Solutions has become a trusted partner to the agency, helping it balance cost, security, and performance so YCAS can stay close to and better serve the children and families it supports. Lee says, "We've been with Gibraltar Solutions for more than 10 years. If I need anything, Gibraltar is always very helpful. They help me get my job done and I couldn't be happier."

About Us

Gibraltar Solutions is a leading Canadian technology provider with over 20 years of experience in the IT industry. We specialize in the design, integration and optimization of high-quality, enterprise-level IT infrastructure solutions in commercial, industrial and governmental sectors.

We help customers to automate, streamline and manage their IT processes and digitally transform their business for improved productivity, performance and profitability. Our solutions range across a broad spectrum from point-solutions to fully managed project implementations, tailored to meet the evolving needs of today's digital economy.

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