



“I don’t do case studies lightly. The reason why I’m happy to do this is because MessageLabs has delivered what it promised. ICI just doesn’t have an email problem anymore.”

Paul Simmonds, Global Information Security Director, ICI

ICI

Email and web-browsing are business-critical applications for ICI, but back in 2003 Paul Simmonds, the company’s Global Information Security Director, was growing worried about the risks they posed.

The industrial giant employs 33,000 people in 55 different countries, and has a turnover of £5.6bn. Needless to say, shutting down email and internet access was not an option. “Like any large corporate, both are essential to our everyday business. If they stop, our business stops,” says Simmonds. What he needed was a system that could protect the business and control the risks.

Viruses and denial of service

His primary concern was viruses, and the window of danger between a new virus being discovered ‘in the wild’ and the release of an updated signature file to trap it. This gap can range from hours to days.

Some viruses had already slipped through this crack. In one case, 600 copies of the virus had escaped before the signatures were released. Luckily they didn’t do any harm but it was a worrying precedent. A malicious, Lotus Notes-aware virus could have had catastrophic results. He began looking for scanner that worked heuristically to complement signature-based anti-virus software on users’ workstations.

Another urgent problem was bandwidth. Having a three-letter domain name is great, except that it is an easy target for spammers. “We were occasionally getting heavily mail-bombed. People would spoof us and we’d get six million replies.” According to Simmonds, at times the flood nearly brought the company’s email servers to a standstill.

Selection and installation

Before finally selecting MessageLabs’ Anti-Virus and Anti-Spam services, Simmonds and his team examined several other options: developing an in-house solution, upgrading their existing anti-virus software and using hardware anti-virus appliances. And of course the MessageLabs outsourced, managed service.

Simmonds found the MessageLabs approach particularly attractive. Economies of scale mean a lot in the world of security. “The odds of you getting a virus that they haven’t seen before is very, very small,” he says.

“Outsourcing is very attractive,” he explains, but only when there is a clear demarcation between the outsourced service and what is done in-house. On a technical level, the only interface between MessageLabs and ICI is a change to the company’s MX records (the internet address to which incoming mail is sent). Simmonds describes MessageLabs as “dead easy to outsource. It’s very much a ‘fire and forget’ solution.”

Security and redundancy

Simmonds found reassurance on two important points. First, MessageLabs was able to offer a globally resilient system. ICI’s US email was handled by MessageLabs’ US systems and the UK domains were looked after by MessageLabs systems in the UK. However, in the event of a problem with either, the other can step in and handle ICI’s worldwide traffic on its own. Simmonds: “they had the global infrastructure to match our global infrastructure.”

The second issue concerned security and privacy. Since both ICI and MessageLabs use the ISO17799 security standard, the two companies' security policies matched and interlocked neatly. Not only that, but being a UK company, they have to adhere the EU's high data protection requirements by default.

Once the technical and regulatory issues were dealt with, the happiest surprise came when ICI compared the cost of the different solutions. After a rigorous technical and financial comparison, the company found that "MessageLabs ticked all the boxes and cost significantly less than any other options," once everything was factored in.

Sleep easy

Having made the decision to deploy MessageLabs, the rollout across 39 email domains worldwide took about six weeks, and was complete by March 2003.

Simmonds is very happy with the result. He is winning the war against spam. ICI gets 60m spam emails a year, which is 76 percent of their total incoming email - yet users report seeing a tiny fraction of the spam they used to receive. It's just not a problem for them any more as it is caught before it even reaches ICI's own email servers, which takes care of their old bandwidth problem.

The story is even better when it comes to viruses. The company receives 5m emails annually with malicious attachments. But they get killed stone dead. The number of malicious emails that get through is zero. According to Simmonds, ICI hasn't had had a single virus via its email system since installing MessageLabs.

Multinational challenges

Being a global company presented some interesting challenges, which MessageLabs met head on. ICI has businesses in 55 countries and customers in many more. This means that any anti-spam solution has to cope with messages, both spam and legitimate, in many different languages. "We sell around 50,000 products in just about every market you can imagine and we receive orders from just about everywhere." Not only that, but being a chemical company, many emails contain product names that sound suspiciously like names that might appear in a spam email.

To make the problem even tougher: "Some of our markets don't trust local ISPs and deliberately use Yahoo! and Hotmail to send messages. We couldn't just block these people, so we had a problem where we needed to get the white list [of trusted email senders] to a point where we were happy," says Simmonds. ICI's solution was to enlist users to help build a white list by reporting false positives. This is now a standard feature of MessageLabs' Email Protect.

No worries

For ICI, MessageLabs Anti-Virus and Anti-Spam delivers as promised. "I have come across many security solutions in my 15-20 years in the business. Only two operated exactly as advertised and were easy to put in." MessageLabs is one of those products. "The only real conclusion is that, at the end of the day, it works."