IBM

Network Station links equipment rental firm's remote stores to HQ more affordably

Prime Equipment, a Houston-based firm that rents and sells construction equipment and tools, has been on a fast growth track, rapidly opening new stores throughout the Southern and Western U.S. One small problem: each time a new store joins the Prime family, its remote terminals must be linked to an AS/400®-based point-of-sale application that the company uses.

"Most of our workstations are older PCs that cost us about $2,000 each per year to support," says Travis Singleton, manager of Technology Development at Prime. Singleton figures that with an average of six PCs per store, the company is spending upwards of $1.2 million in PC support annually.

To reduce these costs and bring greater coherence to his technology infrastructure, Singleton recently decided to replace many of the PCs in Prime's stores with IBM Network Station network computers.

Cost savings ahead
Being in the rental business, Prime understands the need to avoid high maintenance and upkeep costs. By deploying Network Stations in place of at least four PCs in each store, Singleton expects to slash support costs dramatically. "I estimate the Network Station will cost only about $200 annually to support," he says. Its low initial price also will save Prime an additional $4,000 in hardware costs per store compared to upgrading the PCs.

Singleton sees other advantages, as well. "Ninety-nine percent of what I need is AS/400 and 5250 screens," he says. "The Network Station is the only NC I know that offers native 5250 emulation and allows several terminal sessions at once on the desktop." To demonstrate the advantage of multiple sessions, Singleton offers the example of a counter person looking up equipment prices and availability in one 5250 session while entering a customer's rental contract in another.

Singleton points out that most counter personnel in Prime's stores have mechanical backgrounds and are not fluent in PCs.

Application	Desktop client with multiple server access
Hardware	IBM Network Station
Software	Terminal evaluation, midrange client/server applications, PC productivity applications

This makes the Network Station ideal. Its interface is clean and easy to use, and there are no operating system issues or unnecessary applications to distract users.

Singleton tells of one store where he ran a PC pilot. "People just couldn't figure it out," he says. "One person minimized an application and couldn't find it again. We had disk drive and network card failures, and people loading games on the system."

Then, Prime replaced the PCs at the store with Network Stations and the problems disappeared. "The users love it," he says. "Employees aren't playing games, the 5250 screens are always available and the hardware works — everything is locked down tight and totally foolproof."

Standards-based computing
Switching from PCs to Network Stations is part of a larger move toward less expensive, standards-based connectivity at Prime. While about 95 of Prime's 160 stores have IP connections to its headquarters in Houston, the remaining 65 stores use SNA.

Singleton wants to bring all the SNA systems over to IP, for which the Network Station offers native support. "As we move to bring e-mail, Lotus Notes™ and PC applications to remote workstations, IP is clearly the way to go," he says. "IP is less expensive and is fully-supported by our applications, as well as our routers and our laptops."

Sales people with laptops are currently using dial-up connections that cost Prime roughly $30,000 a month, Singleton says. "Once we get everyone on IP, they can plug into the same Ethernet LAN the Network Stations use and connect to all our systems over our frame-relay network," he says.

Prime also avoids dial-up costs and download times when booting a remote Network Station. Instead of having the Network Station dial in to Prime's AS/400 and download megabytes of boot files, Singleton packs all the necessary files on "flash" memory cards and then distributes them to his stores. The stores simply plug the card into a Network Station and in less than a minute the machine is fired-up and ready to go. "This is a real time-saver," Singleton says. "If we had to boot over dial-up lines, it would take from 10 to 20 minutes, even at 56K."

Right for the future
Prime expects the day is not far off when online transactions become a vital part of the company's business. Already, customers want to order equipment via e-mail. "We're looking at that, as well as longer-term, Web-based solutions using a browser interface," Singleton says. Prime has even considered placing Network Stations at customer sites. "We'll do whatever it takes to get their business," he says.

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