Airnet Group helps the Georgia Office of the State Treasurer bolster security and enable remote workers with Windows Virtual Desktop and Microsoft Azure

Microsoft

Challenge: the Georgia Office of the State Treasurer (OST) wanted to modernize its operations with new technology, but it needed help

The Georgia OST was looking to use cloud technology to bolster security and reliability while enabling remote workers, but it couldn't do it alone.

Solution: finding partners in Airnet Group and Microsoft

Microsoft partner Airnet Group helped the Georgia OST plan out its digital transformation and successfully implement Windows Virtual Desktop and Microsoft Azure in its environment.

Results: unlocking new benefits and reducing costs

By helping the Georgia OST leverage the power of Microsoft technology, Airnet helped the Treasury improve security and reliability, enable remote workers, and reduce costs.

A leader in cloud-based IT, Airnet Group, Inc. is a Microsoft partner with a Gold Cloud Platform competency located in Chattanooga, Tennessee that serves several diverse industries across the United States. The Airnet team provides professional, managed, and consulting services to their clients while assisting them through cloud-based digital transformations. For organizations looking to modernize their operations and improve security with cutting-edge Microsoft technologies, Airnet is an invaluable partner.

Recently, Airnet was engaged by the Georgia Office of the State Treasurer (OST) to assist with its migration to Microsoft Azure. Digital transformation and modernization have been critical in the financial services and government industries for years now, but as banks and organizations add new technology, they can expose themselves to new threats. The Georgia OST wanted to leverage cloud technology to modernize its operations, simultaneously improving reliability, enabling remote workers, and bolstering security.

"For us, security is everything. We oversee some $20B USD for the State of Georgia annually, so we have to be secure," says Craig Cannon, an Infrastructure Security Engineer with the Georgia OST. "Availability is key too – we have to move money daily. Regardless of what's going on in the world, money still has to move. We knew Windows Virtual Desktop would be the perfect solution to help us enable remote workers and improve security."

This means that even amidst infrastructure outages, a natural disaster, or a global pandemic, the Georgia OST must be able to do its job quickly, securely, and remotely, getting money into the hands of people and organizations who need it most. Although the 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 has certainly heightened the need for remote work, modern employers have been striving to provide this option to their employees for years.

In addition to enabling remote workers and improving reliability and efficiency, the Georgia OST was also looking to switch from outdated password protection to biometric and multi-factor authentication (MFA) security. Altogether, this was going to require a significant digital transformation.

Given that the Georgia OST already had many Microsoft products deployed in its environment, it knew it wanted to keep Microsoft as its main solution provider. "With Microsoft being at the forefront of what we were doing, we wanted to continue to work with them to take advantage of their tools and technology to simplify our operations and ideally lower costs," explains Bill Wyatt, CISO and CIO at the Georgia OST. "If we can advance certain areas and capabilities while lowering costs, that's always the goal."

Wyatt and his team had big plans in mind, but once they began laying the groundwork for their digital transformation, they quickly realized they wouldn't be able to do it alone. They would need to partner with Airnet and leverage Microsoft technology to unlock all the Georgia OST's desired outcomes.

Bolstering security

Security was the first area of focus for the Georgia OST. When you are responsible for $20B USD in funds annually, traditional password protection just doesn't cut it anymore. To start bolstering security, the OST equipped employees with Surface 2 devices featuring built-in, best-in-class threat protection. "I love that the security is built into the hardware," explains Cannon. "The trusted chip, the fact that Windows Hello uses biometrics and facial recognition every day when I log in. I'm totally sold on the Surface."

Additionally, the Georgia OST improved security by migrating many of its workloads and much of its data to Microsoft Azure. Boasting over 90 compliance certifications, Microsoft Azure is the most secure cloud in the world and was designed to meet the needs of the most security-intense industries such as banking and government.

New hardware and a cloud migration were only the first steps, though – the Georgia OST's overarching goal was much larger: shifting the security paradigm. "I came from an environment where you used to say, 'trust but verify'. That doesn't work anymore, you can't trust anyone," explains Cannon. "Now, we're evolving into a zero-trust mentality. Verify everything."

This means implementing additional precautions such as MFA. MFA requires workers to provide more than just their credentials to log in, they need to authenticate themselves a second way, too. The Georgia OST explored a few MFA solution options, but decided to go with the built-in Microsoft Authenticator app. "I'm a firm believer that complexity is the enemy of security," notes Cannon. "Things don't have to be complex to be powerful. We implemented Microsoft MFA within a couple days and had it up and running with no issues."

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Simplifying the Treasury's environment

Simplification was a key goal throughout the Georgia OST's entire digital transformation, and, according to Cannon, it unlocked two key benefits for users and IT admins alike: it built trust and it accelerated ramp-up times. "We can pick things up quickly now and deploy new technology with ease. For example, we literally did a two-day training session on Microsoft Teams and now all of us love it," recounts Cannon. "Even for Microsoft Stream, we were able to ramp up on it quickly and pull together an interactive livestream for our Treasurer and other Georgia State agencies in a few days. All of the technology plays well together, and the ease of use and simplicity makes it more powerful and more secure."

Airnet's support was critical in this simplification effort. To simplify IT management and security, Airnet helped the Georgia OST consolidate their two disparate tenants, one commercial and one government, into a single tenant. When the Georgia OST was spinning up its new environment in Microsoft Azure, Wyatt recalls that "There just weren't that many problems - the onboarding was clean. Normally you run into problems when onboarding something new to your environment, but Airnet made it all smooth. They were great to work with."

The partnership between Airnet and the Microsoft deployment team was critical to meeting the Georgia OST's needs. "We were talking on a near-daily basis behind the scenes to make the transition to single tenant seamless," said Greg Jones, CIO at Airnet. "Combining our extensive experience with government clients and their needs with the in-depth knowledge from Microsoft for Windows Virtual Desktop deployments, we were able to prepare and roll out the new environment quickly and efficiently."

Enabling remote workers

With enhanced security in place, the Georgia OST and Airnet could turn their focus to unlocking other important outcomes such as enabling remote workers. For this, the OST uses Windows Virtual Desktop. When Windows Virtual Desktop was still in preview during 2019, Airnet helped the Georgia OST set up several host pools to test the solutions security against traditional VPNs. After immediately seeing the solutions security and convenience benefits, the Georgia OST decided to deploy it to the entire organization, enabling all users to securely access key corporate systems via Windows Virtual Desktop host machines and significantly simplifying environment management.

"Windows Virtual Desktop has given us a lot more insight and security than we used to have. It's helped us back up our files with redundancies in the cloud and on-prem, and it's worked very well," notes Cannon. "Even before COVID-19, we were working diligently to enable work from home. When it came time for everyone to work remote, we were more than prepared. We haven't been back to the office in seven weeks and we haven't missed a beat."

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"When we said, 'starting Monday, we're all going to be working from home until further notice', it was a non-event for us because our team can use all their business apps remotely now," added Wyatt. "Our users started working at home and it was like clockwork, all because of Windows Virtual Desktop, our Microsoft Azure implementation, our architecture, and the different security and controls we have in place. Anyone working remotely can sign on to Windows Virtual Desktop and access their files the same way they would inside the office, it's the exact same experience."

Windows Virtual Desktop does more than just enable remote OST workers to access the information and apps they need – it also bolsters security. "Initially we envisioned using Windows Virtual Desktop to enable people to work from home when they needed to," explains Dwamelle McGill, Systems Engineer at the Georgia OST. "But the more we learned about it, we realized Windows Virtual Desktop provides more flexibility for the agency, more availability in case of disaster recovery, and security capabilities like encryption all the way down to the kernel that we couldn't get from other solutions. Everyone in the agency is using it 100 percent of the time right now. Our new employees can get started using their own computers and they can access everything from home as if they were in the office on a managed device."

Preparing for the future

Looking ahead, Airnet is excited to continue supporting the Georgia OST through its digital transformation journey while helping other clients do the same. Airnet has successfully built out its Microsoft Azure and Windows Virtual Desktop practices thanks to great skilling and training resources from Microsoft, and Airnet's success can serve as a framework for other partners looking to capitalize on the repeatability, simplicity, and power of solutions like Windows Virtual Desktop to help customers enable remote workforces.

As cloud technologies become more and more prevalent worldwide, Microsoft partners like Airnet are uniquely positioned to see accelerated growth and profitability in this sector over the coming years.

"The strength of the Windows Virtual Desktop solution and the deployment know-how we bring to the table as a partner have delivered tangible value to this customer already, and we see even more in the future for them and our other customers. We're excited by the possibilities."

— Greg Jones, CIO, Airnet Group