

Long Island Business NEWS

NOV. 12-18, 2010 | VOL. 57 | NO. 50 | \$2.00 | libn.com

Textbook case

Local software firm develops a product around a school district's concerns

By JOHN CALLEGARI

When Port Jefferson school administrators decided they would provide the entire district's sixth grade class with Lenovo ThinkPad notebook computers at the start of the 2009-2010 school year, they began wondering how best to prevent the devices from being used to access inappropriate content.

To solve the problem, Brian Sandak, the district's network and system's administrator, turned to Hauppauge-based BASCOM Global Internet Services Inc., whose Global Chalkboard software had been filtering content for the school district's network for roughly seven years. BASCOM responded by solving the school's needs and creating a new product it could market to others.

Called the Anywhere Filter, BASCOM's latest software targeting the pre-K through 12th grade educational community was recently unveiled at the Long Island Technology Summit after a year of beta testing provided by the Port Jefferson School District.

"Schools are trying to incorporate laptops and mobile devices into education," said Diane Hagan, marketing communications manager for BASCOM. "This is a great trend, but parents may fear that their children could become exposed to inappropriate content as a result. If the school has a filter that's fine, but if you're using a mobile device, you can easily access other people's Wi-Fi network while not at school."



Diane Hagan: BASCOM hopes to bring its Anywhere Filter software to all mobile devices.

BASCOM: Students and teachers get equal protection

The Anywhere Filter, unlike a typical filter that hooks up to a network, is always active on the laptops and mobile devices it is placed on, no matter how the equipment accesses the Internet. So while filtering products usually only work within the school's own network, Anywhere Filter brings the filter settings to the mobile device or laptop.

In Port Jefferson, it allowed school administrators to enforce the district's Internet policy even when the students weren't at school.

"Obviously we blocked things like pornographic material," Sandak said, "but we also wanted to make sure the kids were kept focused on what they were supposed to be doing, so we took out access to websites like Facebook and YouTube – sites where kids can just waste time. ... And the parents have been very pleased with the results."

While Anywhere Filter prevents children from accessing inappropriate content on the Internet, Hagan noted that it protects the school district and its staff just as much.

"[Sandak] stressed that a lot of staff members do work at home on staff laptops," Hagan said. "If their

computers get victimized by a malicious website, and then they bring it back to [school], it could compromise the entire school network of computers."

Hagan said while other companies offer similar products, the Anywhere Filter is designed exclusively for the educational community.

Hagan has already identified the Mineola School District as a potential client, following the district's purchase of 100 iPads for its fifth grade students earlier this year; however, BASCOM and the school district haven't met yet.

"We have a filter on every computer in school through Symantec, so we're protected while the kids are at school," said Mineola School District Superintendent Michael Nagler. "However, right now we've just had the parents sign a contract acknowledging that it's their responsibility when the device goes home. I'm not sure if we want to get into the realm of controlling what they do at home, but it's something to explore. Cost of implementation will ultimately be a factor."

If the Mineola School District does decide to give BASCOM a

chance, the Hauppauge firm may have to make some changes to its Anywhere Filter software.

"If our [iPad] pilot program is successful, we're going to expand it," Nagler said. "We're looking at other tablets as well, because Apple doesn't discount their products for schools. Hewlett-Packard just came out with theirs, so we're in the beginning stages of talks with them and Microsoft about the future of this program."

Although the filtering device supports Microsoft's Windows-based operating systems, like those found in Port Jefferson's ThinkPads, as well as iPads, iPhones, iPod Touches and the Mac OS X operating system, it does not support Android, Google's mobile platform that comes installed on most touch-screen tablet computers currently on the market.

"While we don't currently support [Google's] operating system, we certainly could make the needed changes to accommodate it," Hagan said. "We look for direction from our customers about what their needs and wants are, and then we do our best to implement them into our products."



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