



ForeScout's Network Access Control Powers Network Security at NorthWestern Energy

“CounterACT provides a different approach—it ‘listens’ to network activity and interrogates each device virtually unnoticeably to the end user.”

Frank Wilson
IT Network Specialist
NorthWestern Energy

NorthWestern Energy is an investor-owned utility and one of the largest providers of electricity and natural gas in the northwest quadrant of the United States. Serving approximately 640,000 customers in Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska, NorthWestern Energy has approximately 1,350 full-time employees. Classified as a “mid-sized” utility by most industry standards, the company’s service territory size is one of the largest in the country.

NorthWestern Energy, with its mission-critical network of 2,000 endpoints spread across 80 sites covering three states, required a security solution to provide protection against zero-day threats like self-propagating malware, non-compliant device detection and remediation, as well as role-based access control to its network resources for all connecting devices.

The company considered network access control (NAC) solutions from an extensive list of vendors including ForeScout Technologies, Cisco, Insightix and Symantec. After carefully studying and testing each solution, while paying close attention to industry recognition and independent consulting reports, the company chose ForeScout’s CounterACT solution as its NAC solution.

Why ForeScout?

“We looked very closely at each solution and also got a very good recommendation for ForeScout by an independent integration consultant who installs a lot of NAC solutions,” said Frank Wilson, IT Network Specialist at NorthWestern Energy. “We needed an agentless solution, and when we delved deeper into looking at CounterACT, the decision was easy.”

CounterACT allows NorthWestern Energy to scan its employees’ devices—including wired and wireless endpoints—in order to determine whether a machine is free of malware, and whether its antivirus and operating system

security patches are up-to-date. With ForeScout’s CounterACT, users remain productive while their devices are being inspected for policy compliance, and enforcement actions to remediate a problem or block a device from the network entirely are invoked only when a compliance violation is identified.

“CounterACT is effective in both pre- and post-sign-on phases,” said Wilson. “It also has a minimal impact on the end-user whose device is being scanned.”

NorthWestern Energy deployed CounterACT first in “Audit Only” mode, a feature the organization appreciated, before turning on policy enforcement in order to assess its users and their devices. In addition, CounterACT provides the company with role-based control. “The role-based control feature is essential when you have various types of workers—consultants, part-time students, and full-time employees,” said Wilson. “CounterACT allows us to differentiate those users and give them access to only the areas they need to get their jobs done.”

How ForeScout Helped

- » CounterACT is easy to deploy and is easy to administer. CounterACT fit directly into NorthWestern Energy’s existing infrastructure so the company was able to maximize its existing IT investments (i.e. Windows Active Directory) while adding the benefits of a flexible NAC solution.
- » CounterACT provides NorthWestern Energy with granular role-based access control. CounterACT differentiates between types of end-users and ensures only the right users with the right devices gain access to the right network resources. Following device interrogation, users are granted access based on their role in the company.
- » Device interrogation is seamless. Users remain productive while their device is being monitored and interrogated for compliance.
- » CounterACT is deployed out-of-band. NorthWestern Energy deployed the solution with no downtime or disruptions, and in the unlikely case of an appliance failure, the essential network services will not be affected.
- » Truly signatureless protection against malware. CounterACT defends against zero-day threats without manual signature/definitions updates, ensuring NorthWestern Energy is always protected against worms and malware.

The ForeScout Difference

With ForeScout’s CounterACT, NorthWestern Energy no longer experiences network downtimes caused by infected or non-compliant devices accessing the network. In addition, the company is able to tailor different security policies for each of its network segments, enforcing stricter policies for specific departments that require additional levels of security, as well as offering a guest segment to users that need minimal access to corporate network resources.

“We appreciate the flexibility of CounterACT,” said Wilson. “We’re able to shut down ports without a need for 802.1x ports or VLANs, and we can also block a port yet still allow a specific workstation or server to operate. NorthWestern Energy has a more secure and reliable network as a result of the successful CounterACT implementation, with regards to access control, zero-day threat protection, as well as device detection, inspection and remediation.”