



Ensuring Covid-19 is no obstacle to emergency calls

BT worked quickly to guarantee that Ireland's essential Emergency Call Answering Service (ECAS) could carry on as usual during the pandemic.

Overview

For the last decade, BT has been running ECAS in Ireland, providing a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) that is among the best in the world. We answer 2.37 million calls a year, around 6,000 a day, typically in 0.7 seconds, and guarantee 99.999 per cent availability. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, we had to revisit the fundamentals of an essential service that could become even more important during a national medical emergency.

The challenge

There is an implicit understanding that when a member of the public calls 112 or 999, they will be connected in seconds to the appropriate emergency service closest to them, whether it's An Garda Síochána, the Fire Service, Ambulance Service or Coast Guard. At BT, we have continually challenged ourselves to do it faster and more efficiently, but our hard-earned expertise in high availability and call location technology was almost irrelevant faced with the unexpected consequences of a global pandemic.

Like a lot of businesses in Ireland when lockdown started, we had the challenge of delivering an essential service in a radically different landscape. In the case of the ECAS, there was no room for error with calls that could be the difference between life and death. High availability has always been the bedrock of the service, which is currently run out of two locations, one in Ballyshannon, Co Donegal, and the second in Navan, Co Meath. The Covid-19 challenge was making sure they could function if the virus infected our employees on any scale.

We employ over 80 people across both locations, backroom staff as well as highly trained call takers. "Our preference for a high-profile service like ECAS, where security and availability are paramount, would always be to have our call takers within BT's four walls, but we had to have another plan," explained Mick Kelly, BT's Head of Operations at ECAS. "We were told by the Government at the outset to prepare for absence levels of 20 percent due to sickness and social isolation.

The solution

Enabling backroom staff to work from home was straightforward for BT, but call takers required a more exacting exploration of the technical requirements. Because ECAS is run over an IP network, emergency calls can be diverted anywhere. The plan was to connect homes to data centres over a VPN (Virtual Private Network) with advanced security protocols, but it would depend on the quality of residential broadband connections being good enough. “We started on a Friday morning and worked over the weekend. By Monday afternoon we were testing live calls over broadband and knew how to do it,” said Kelly.

Every broadband connection is different in terms of stability and speed, often determined by distance from the exchange. We identified a minimum speed requirement and were able to confirm that most staff had connections that were fast enough, and more importantly, sufficiently stable. In a small number of cases, where people didn't have the connection quality, we provided them with mobile data dongles, a USB that plugs into their laptop and connects them over Three and Vodafone mobile networks. Wireless could also provide resilience, a failover connection if an employee's fixed-line broadband went down.

The other challenge of running an essential service during the pandemic was following Government guidelines on physical distancing and cleaning. The first thing we did was move the desks as far apart as we could. Next, strict guidelines were introduced on people coming and going. Shifts were staggered to ensure people never met each other: the day shift would operate in Navan and the night shift from a contingency site. Meanwhile, we had new recruits training at another location to give us an added layer if absenteeism became an issue.

Cleaning is now carried out twice a day. On top of that, every staff member is responsible for disinfecting their workstation when their shift is over. We also encourage the next person in to clean the area to their own satisfaction. We have made disinfectant available around office spaces as well as bathrooms and kitchens.

The result

So far, the steps we have taken have been very successful for both BT and our employees. It certainly helped that we reacted quickly and followed the Government's recommendations. We are in a position where our ECAS call takers have not needed to work from home, but there is provision to do so if necessary.

The service is functioning 'business as usual' but call traffic has changed. There are actually fewer calls, but they last longer; call volumes that used to build through the week and peak early on Saturday and Sunday morning, when pubs and clubs closed, now tend to drop away after 11pm. The quietest time for emergency calls in Ireland is 10.30am, Tuesday morning.

“We're seeing huge levels of social compliance in Ireland and the virus hasn't directly affected BT's ECAS operation. But we have done the groundwork and prepared our employees to make sure the service would continue as usual even if it did,” said Mick Kelly. “Our call operators can work from home if they have to.” and we can introduce it quickly if we had to.”

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