

STENA LINE: SMOOTH SAILING WITH BIGFIX®



CASE STUDY

AT A GLANCE

Stena Line, a growing freight and passenger ferry operator in Northern Europe, relies on BigFix to manage PCs and servers in both fixed locations and carried aboard its ships.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Manage geographically dispersed computing infrastructure that includes head office, remote facility and ship-borne computing platforms.
- Deliver management services to multiple mobile and fixed locations over a bandwidth-limited leased satellite communications link.
- Manage a computing infrastructure that is not only mobile but supports distinct classes of general management and retail computing applications.
- Maintain and remediate point-of-sale computers at times that don't disrupt business.



IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- BigFix installed on 2,200 endpoint computers at headquarters offices, field locations (ports and harbors), and aboard 35 ferry ships sailing the Irish, North and Baltic seas.
- BigFix-supported services include patch management, software distribution and asset inventory.
- BigFix management communications uses a shared 2 Mbit/sec satellite downlink and 128 Kbit uplink for all Stena Line ferry ships.
- 55 BigFix relays conserve satellite bandwidth and enable redundant, reliable management communications.

RESULTS

- Real-time management and control of geographically fluid IT infrastructure without need for additional communications bandwidth.
- Patch and update actions that formerly required three administrators one month to complete (estimate 240 person hours), now require one administrator 20 total hours of labor—12:1 labor savings ratio.



“BigFix relays help us manage our infrastructure without having to pay for more expensive communications capacities.”

Björn Wahll,
Systems Analyst, Stena Line

Since its founding in 1962, Sweden’s Stena Line has grown to become the largest passenger and freight ferry operator in Northern Europe. Stena Line’s 35 ships serve routes in the North, Irish, and Baltic Seas and carried 16 million passengers and 1.7 million tons of freight in 2005. Although market changes such as low fare airlines, the Channel Tunnel and the Öresund bridge linking Denmark and Sweden have increased competition for passenger and freight traffic, economic expansion in Eastern Europe, general growth in the travel sector, and rise in truck freight traffic have resulted in a steadily growing business for Stena Line.

The company’s computing infrastructure supports a wide variety of business activities that include general business administration; reservations and load management; navigation, logging and ship systems management; and ship-board consumer retail point-of-sale. Along with computers at Stena Line headquarters in Göteborg, Stena IT manages machines at 18 seaport facilities and 35 ships. To communicate between this mix of fixed and mobile assets, the company has leased a dedicated satellite communications channel providing 2 Mbit/sec downlink and 128 Kbit/sec uplink communications.

By early 2005, it became increasingly clear to Stena Line Systems Analyst Björn Wahll and others that the company's patch and system management solution was not measuring up to expectations set for it. According to Wahll; "The incumbent tool was slow and haphazard in delivering patches and software updates to the company's computers. We then started a search for a new solution and quickly settled on a short list of competitors that included Patch Link, BigFix and Microsoft software products. After an evaluation phase, the company selected BigFix as its primary system management tool."

Overcoming Communications Constraints

While BigFix scored highly in important areas such as visibility, speed and accuracy of remediation, the unique features of the BigFix Enterprise Suite management communications infrastructure also tipped the balance in BigFix's favor. BigFix Relays, which act as concentration points for BigFix content and communications, were an ideal choice to work under the bandwidth constraints posed by Stena Line's 2Mbit/second satellite communications link. Says Wahll: "Two megabits-per-second may sound like a reasonably ample connection, except when you remember that it is shared by all Stena Line's ships. The BigFix Relay technology helps us to maintain real-time visibility and management of our infrastructure without having to pay for more expensive communications capacities."

BIGFIX DEPLOYMENT

Beginning in the summer of 2005, Stena Line began implementing its BigFix solution on the company's 2,200 computers. System management services delivered over the solution focus on security patching plus software distribution and updating. Software distributed using the solution includes Windows Service Packs and updates to applications such as Adobe document management tools and Flash media player.

The BigFix solution currently includes 55 relays, with 35 of these installed about Stena Line ships, 20 in onshore harbor facilities and one master relay at Stena Line headquarters. Wahll comments: "In addition to helping conserve communications bandwidth, the BigFix Relays add reliability to BigFix management communications. We have configured the relays in a kind of triangle fashion. If a BigFix-managed relay cannot find its primary parent relay on the network, it will look for a secondary relay until it establishes a connection. This also means that two remote facilities can be patched while the patches are sent only once over the WAN link."

Customization Through BigFix Fixlet® Messages

Wahll has also used BigFix custom scripting capabilities to better synchronize management actions with computer use cycles. For example, many shipboard computers support retail point-of-sale operations at shops and restaurants on board the ferries. These machines are in almost constant use and cannot stop to load a patch or update software. Here, Wahll has written a custom BigFix Fixlet message that recognizes when a computer's screen saver launches, providing a window of opportunity to perform remediation actions.

SUMMING UP

Wahll says that the BigFix solution has met or exceeded Stena Line's expectations. The company has experienced improved security as measured by sharp declines in staff time devoted to defending against virus and malware attacks. The BigFix solution has also significantly increased IT staff productivity. Previously, installing a Windows Service Pack on Stena Line infrastructure would take one month and require three administrators to work half time, approximately 240 hours of work. With BigFix, an equivalent Service Pack upgrade can be completed in one week, with one administrator working half time, or about 20 hours. This represents a twelve-to-one reduction in staff time, freeing administrators to perform higher value actions.

"Our investment in BigFix paid itself back in just a few months and we are pleased with the product," says Wahll. "The services we can provide through BigFix help the IT department contribute to Stena Line's reputation as one of the most efficient, reliable and safe ferry operators in the world."



BigFix: Breakthrough Technology, Revolutionary Economics

BigFix, Inc. offers the IT industry's only intelligent IT policy enforcement engine that enables real-time visibility and control of globally distributed desktop, mobile and server computer infrastructures. Built on a revolutionary technology platform, BigFix continually assesses and manages the health and security of enterprise computing devices at the velocity of change.

Without requiring massive investment in dedicated management resources, BigFix automates enterprise-scale malware defense, asset management, software inventory and distribution, vulnerability assessment, policy enforcement, power conservation, and patch management, without compromising network performance, end-user productivity, or security.

BigFix delivers outstanding return-on-investment through slashing IT infrastructure costs of ownership and management complexity while enabling IT organizations to elevate security configuration management from chronic pain point to positive business value resource.