OC Tech Dr. Keeps COVID Testing Centers Online With Datto Networking

CovidClinic's Explosive Growth Gives MSP the Opportunity (and Challenge) of a Lifetime

In 2020, Mike Gelerter, owner of OC Tech Dr., found himself with all the business he could handle as a result of COVID-19.

As the managed service provider (MSP) to CovidClinic, a nonprofit organization formed to support rapid community-based testing, OC Tech Dr. assists with setting up and managing critical networks under tough field conditions. He was tasked with providing reliable network services to temporary buildings, typically set up in the parking lot of a shopping mall, with no wired Internet connection and no reliable power. In fact, one location had a generator catch fire and explode.

"I had every strike against me known to IT," he said. Gelerter made it work with perseverance and by using Datto DNA networking devices as fail-safe backups at each CovidClinic location.

Designed for cloud-managed administration, the Datto DNA devices helped him rapidly scale CovidClinic's network from the first Orange County locations to 68 in California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, and Nevada, and Utah as of early 2021 -- with expansion into Texas, Florida, and other states coming soon.

Dependable Connections

Keeping the network running is essential for both administration -- access to the registration application used at each location's front desk -- as well as software used for the actual testing and reporting of results. Since CovidClinic specializes in instant tests for anxious patients, the goal is to get them an answer as soon as possible. When the diagnostic equipment produces a result, it's transmitted to an Azure cloud instance where a Python script turns it into a text message to the patient.

Because CovidClinic uses temporary medical facilities with metal walls that present challenges for WiFi, each of those "pods"gets its own DNA to provide reliable connectivity. Primary Internet connectivity for each site came through Netgear cellular modems connected to the same AT&T network used by first responders. The modems, in turn, were connected by an ethernet cable to a DNA unit.

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Owner of OC Tech Dr.

The DNA wireless routers do double duty, securing network traffic on a day-to-day basis and preventing unauthorized access, while also providing network failover through their own access to the Verizon cellular network. "I was really proud of that setup," Gelerter says.

"Yeah, there are other ways -- like doing paper registration at the front desk if the network is down -- but that would slow everything down," Gelerter explained. "With some locations processing 600 tests or more in a day, and lines of anxious people waiting to get in, letting tests be delayed because of a network issue would have been unforgivable," he said.

Your Mission, If You Choose to Accept It

Gelerter got the opportunity to help CovidClinic through his own family doctor, Matthew Abinante, who co-founded the California nonprofit public benefit corporation in the Spring of 2020 as the demand for COVID-19 testing was exploding. OC Tech Dr. previously impressed Dr. Abinante by providing good service at a reasonable price for a WiFi setup (in contrast with another IT service provider's excessive fees).

The small business Gelerter runs with his wife pulled in additional workers to keep pace with the need to equip new locations . "I would walk into a location to drop off, say 30 units, and they'd tell me, 'By the way, can you get us another 25 -- and we need them tomorrow.' "

Gelerter says he appreciated the close personal attention he got from Datto. Executives who heard about the project and called to ask what they could do to support him. In some cases, they made additional engineering resources available specifically to back him up.

Gelerter's Datto account manager, Brandon Taylor, formed an internal "Covid task force" he could call on to make sure OC Tech Dr. would be able to get CovidClinic the Datto products it needed, when it needed them. "Cutoff for same-day shipping is 3 o'clock, and I've put in orders at 2:59," Taylor says. The unpredictable demand was a matter of "CovidClinic not knowing how fast they were going to grow," he says, but last-minute orders were frequent enough that the Datto shipping department learned to keep an inventory of DNA units on hand.

Remote Administration Matters

After, at first, personally overseeing all the installations at locations within a three-hour drive of his home, Gelerter now co-manages network setups with the small IT and deployment team CovidClinic hired to manage its explosive growth.

Datto DNA remote administration features became increasingly important as CovidClinic expanded outside of California: Gelerter could have the units shipped to new locations with instructions on how to plug them in, then assist with the setup using cloud-based tools. Even as CovidClinic staffs up its IT operations, he oversees a lot of it and consults on the rest. Recently, Gelerter has worked on configuring DNA units mounted to the roofs of vans that will serve as mobile testing units as CovidClinic expands into more states.

One other remote administration story: When he was knee deep in CovidClinic network deployments, one of his other clients had a meltdown of a server that hosted both a domain controller and its accounting application -- the result of an impatient employee deciding to pull the plug during a Windows update. "Oh, not now!" Gelerter thought -- realizing there was no way he could get to that location quickly. Then he remembered he had talked that particular client into letting him install Datto SIRIS backup appliance. By spinning up a replica of the crippled server in a virtual machine hosted on the SIRIS, he was able to get his customer back in business within minutes.

Community Service

The crazy workload has finally begun to subside, leaving Gelerter thankful for the business but sorry that it came to him while so many others were suffering job loss, illness, and deaths in their families.

The importance of COVID testing to his community was the reason Gelerter couldn't turn down the job -- even though he couldn't help worrying that he was subjecting himself to some of the same risks as the healthcare workers doing the testing. He found himself gearing up with protective equipment to enter "hot rooms" where the risk of infection was greatest because that was where equipment had to be installed or repaired. He worried about bringing the disease home to his family. Exhausted but lying awake in the middle of the night, his mind would race with thoughts that his fatigue might be a COVID-19

symptom. "It was not just the workload -- the mental part was probably the toughest," he said.

While the past year was stressful -- "I wouldn't have taken on this work for any other reason," Gelerter said -- it was also rewarding.

The selfless healthcare workers he met and the dedication he saw in them also made a difference. He remembers one lab technician patiently helping him gear up to enter a room where live COVID-19 samples were being identified. "He told me, 'I'm to make sure you're good when you go in, and you'll be fine when you come out,' and then showed me how to put on the gloves and take them off, keeping your fingers inside the whole time," Gelerter explained.

Friends and neighbors have thanked him for playing a role in the project, and other clients have been patient when he couldn't get to them right away, knowing how hard he was working. "It's worth it to know we've done something good for the community," Gelerter says.

About Datto

As the world's leading provider of cloud-based software and security solutions purpose-built for delivery by managed service providers (MSPs), Datto believes there is no limit to what small and medium businesses (SMBs) can achieve with the right technology. Datto's proven Unified Continuity, Networking, and Business Management solutions drive cyber resilience, efficiency, and growth for MSPs. Delivered via an integrated platform, Datto's solutions help its global ecosystem of MSP partners serve over one million businesses around the world. From proactive dynamic detection and prevention to fast, flexible recovery from cyber incidents, Datto's solutions defend against costly downtime and data loss in servers, virtual machines, cloud applications, or anywhere data resides. Since its founding in 2007, Datto has won numerous awards for its product excellence, superior technical support, rapid growth, and for fostering an outstanding workplace. With headquarters in Norwalk, Connecticut, Datto has global offices in Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.

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