



Quest Helps Southern Company “Make it One” with Vintela Authentication Services

Southern Company (NYSE: SO) is a super-regional energy company with an electric generating capacity in excess of 39,000 megawatts and one of the largest energy producers in the United States. It provides electricity to 4.1 million customers across a 120,000 square mile territory in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Florida. The company employs approximately 26,000 individuals and has a highly complex heterogeneous computing environment. Throughout 2004, Southern Company pursued a strategy titled “Make it One”.

The Challenge

“We are primarily a Windows shop,” said Robert Morgan, information services lead, Southern Company, “with around 20,000 Windows desktops and 800 Windows servers company-wide. We have a significant investment in Unix, with 350 Unix servers, as well.” These Unix systems run a variety of the company’s mission-critical applications.

With no centralized process or technology to manage access and identities on Unix systems, basic management tasks resulted in inefficient use of the company’s IT personnel. “Consequently basic password management tasks were falling to our Tier 3 support people rather than the help desk,” said Cliff McManus, IT project manager, Southern Company. “It certainly wasn’t the most efficient use of the time and talents of our valuable personnel assets.”

Southern Company identified three main areas of identity and authentication that needed improvement. First, their fragmented infrastructure meant that password expirations simply weren’t being enforced. Second, password change and maintenance was taking place physically at each Unix box by Tier 3 support personnel, resulting in a long delay between an employee’s termination and complete Unix de-provisioning. And third, their existing infrastructure didn’t provide a way to standardize UID and GID, resulting in redundant and conflicting identities across the range of Unix systems.

“We realized that the savings achieved by centralizing our Windows environment around Active Directory would be amplified if we could do the same thing for our Unix systems,” said Jay Cribb, project lead in IT security, Southern Company. “Windows offered the homogeneity to make the Active Directory migration possible; however our Unix systems were so diverse that without native integration between the environments, our goal seemed out-of-reach.”

Southern Company attempted to find an open-source solution that could bring all network resources into Active Directory (AD). However, the resources could only be properly secured on a very small scale. Vendor solutions (namely password synchronization solutions) were too complex and required the company to build another layer of infrastructure in addition to AD. Internal Kerberos development efforts also proved too complex and costly.

“We fell back on an old standard—a Google search for Unix AD integration,” said Morgan. “The search brought us to a Microsoft presentation from TechEd 2003 that mentioned something called Vintela Authentication Services. It turned out to be just what we needed.”

Overview

“Although we haven’t performed any formal ROI analysis yet, I think it is safe to assume that the financial benefits of Vintela Authentication Services are significant. Having a centralized location for everything is a very effective tool from an auditing perspective.”

- Robert Morgan,
Information Services Lead
Southern Company



Headquarters

Atlanta, Georgia

Critical Needs

A solution that would authenticate users regardless of the platforms involved in order to make ID and password management less complicated and more cost-effective

Solution

Quest Vintela Authentication Services

Results

- Expanded the reach of Active Directory and its capabilities to the rest of the company’s environment
- Eliminated the need for internal customers to maintain multiple passwords and IDs
- Provided the ability to automatically coordinate employee status changes and de-provisioning across all platforms
- Empowered scalability to allow additional capabilities in Active Directory to apply equally to Unix resources
- Enabled business-unit data owners that maintain groups to protect their data and extend the delegated administration features in Active Directory to Unix systems

The Quest Solution

Quest® Vintela® Authentication Services allows Unix and Linux systems to act as full citizens in Microsoft AD, by integrating the authentication interfaces that are native to both platforms. Fundamentally it allows Unix and Linux systems to act as full citizens in AD. Consequently this solution enabled Southern Company to create a single “trusted zone” for all resources (Windows, Unix and Linux) in the AD tool they had already proven and with the enterprise infrastructure they had invested in already.

“Vintela Authentication Services does exactly what we were trying to accomplish, and required neither the resources nor the support that the other alternatives we explored would have demanded,” said Cribb. “With Vintela Authentication Services, all of our Unix systems (the entire range of Solaris and HP) became full participants in our AD environment. The result would be a single point of management for all user IDs, passwords, groups and group membership, regardless of their platform. Suddenly we were able to completely resolve the problems revealed by our audit.”

Today, thanks to Vintela Authentication Services, Southern Company can manage authentication and identity on all systems (Windows, Solaris Unix, HP Unix and even Linux) through AD using their existing infrastructure. “With AD extended out to include all of our systems, Tier 3 support personnel can now work on Tier 3 issues,” said Morgan. “The task of managing passwords can fall to the help desk, which frees our Unix support team to focus on their core responsibilities. Through Vintela Authentication Services, the same capabilities that saved us so much money when we consolidated Windows into AD are now being realized in the Unix world as well.”

The Bottom Line

“Although we haven’t performed any formal ROI analysis yet, I think it is safe to assume that the financial benefits of Vintela Authentication Services are significant,” said Morgan. “Having a centralized location for everything is a very effective tool from an auditing perspective.”

“We have a guiding principle to ‘Make it One’, which means doing everything one way (from a technology perspective) as often as possible,” said Roger Park, manager of server and desktop systems, Southern Company. “Vintela Authentication Services is a great step in that direction.”

About Southern Company

With more than 4 million customers and nearly 39,000 megawatts of generating capacity, Atlanta-based Southern Company (NYSE: SO) is the premier super-regional energy company in the Southeast and a leading U.S. producer of electricity. Southern Company owns electric utilities in four states, a growing competitive generation company and a competitive retail natural gas business, as well as fiber optics and wireless communications. Visit the Southern Company Web site at www.southerncompany.com.

About Quest Software, Inc.

Quest Software, Inc. delivers innovative products that help organizations get more performance and productivity from their applications, databases and Windows infrastructure. Through a deep expertise in IT operations and a continued focus on what works best, Quest helps more than 18,000 customers worldwide meet higher expectations for enterprise IT. Quest Software can be found in offices around the globe and at www.quest.com