

ESG Solution Showcase

Acronis Access Connect: Making It Easy to Connect Macs and Mobile Devices to Windows File Servers

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Abstract: Acronis recently released Acronis Access Connect 10. This is a renaming and evolution of the popular ExtremeZ-IP product that is currently in use in more than 8,000 businesses globally. Acronis Access Connect simplifies IT support for Macs in the enterprise by allowing Macs to access files residing on Windows Servers and network-attached storage (NAS) while mitigating issues that arise when Macs use standard Windows file sharing, including incompatibilities, client connection issues, data corruption, and the lack of popular Mac OS features like Network Spotlight search. Acronis Access Connect now also supports mobile device access to the same file shares. Given the rise in bring-your-own-device (BYOD) policies, primarily driven by employees pushing IT to allow use of an assortment of devices for work, it is becoming more important for IT to embrace the Mac and enable mobile workflows. Products like Acronis Access Connect can help IT make this effort seamless.

Overview

Acronis is primarily known as a data protection company, with over 5 million users in over 300,000 businesses running its products. In recent years, it has expanded the portfolio to offer products that help IT manage and protect data, no matter where it lives. One of the hidden gems in the portfolio has been its ExtremeZ-IP product, which is now renamed Acronis Access Connect.

Acronis Access Connect essentially acts as a translation layer between Macs and Windows Server, allowing users to easily access Windows file shares and network-attached storage (NAS). Users maintain all the benefits of using the Mac-native Apple File Protocol (AFP), such as Time Machine backup and Network Spotlight's fast, full-content search, without IT having to stand up a separate set of file shares for Mac users. Acronis Access Connect handles all the nitty gritty work of mediating the differences between Macs and Windows computers when it comes to metadata handling, file naming conventions, file compatibility, and supporting different Mac OS versions. It even gives Mac users some additional capabilities, such as the ability to browse distributed file system (DFS) namespaces and leverage single sign-on (SSO).

An added component with the latest release (version 10) is the support of mobile devices. Given that the typical knowledge worker is using three mobile devices (a laptop or desktop, a phone, and a tablet) for work, the mobile component is an important piece of the puzzle. Acronis Access Connect allows users to browse and access files via mobile devices, maintaining all of the permissions granted on the Windows Server.

The File Compatibility Issue

Macs and Windows servers use different file sharing protocols. Windows uses Server Message Block & Common Internet File System (SMB/CIFS), while Macs have long used Apple File Protocol (AFP) to connect to file servers. These are essentially separate languages for accessing files.¹ In recent years, Apple has introduced support for SMB/CIFS embedded in Mac OS. But given the differences in how file operations, file naming, and metadata are handled between Macs and Windows, there is still a risk of incompatibilities, client connection issues, and data corruption. What’s more, Mac OS releases have varied in how they handle SMB/CIFS connectivity, making it challenging for environments that have to support multiple versions of Mac OS. Additionally, popular Mac OS features like Network Spotlight search and Time Machine backup are not supported when connecting via the SMB/CIFS clients in Mac OS.

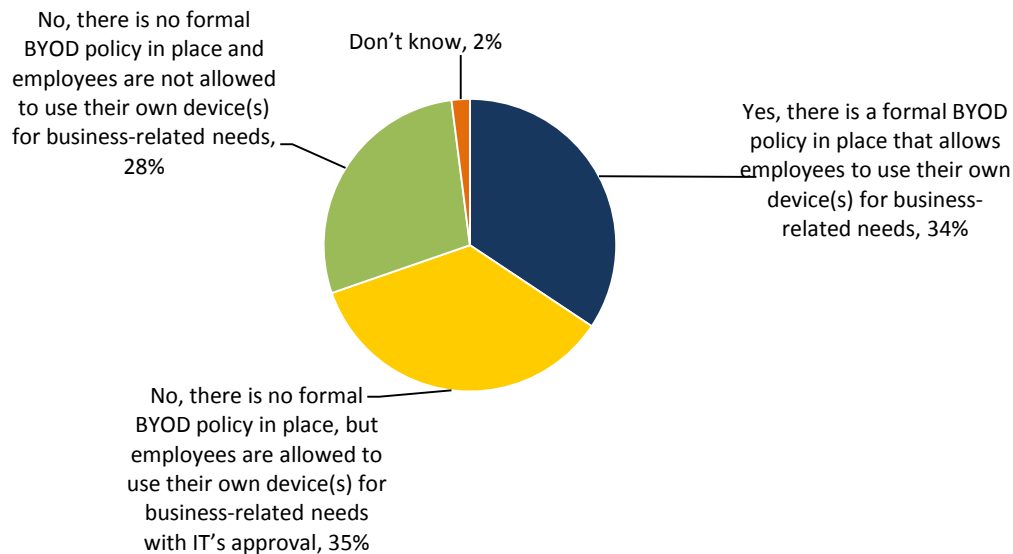
These compatibility issues can cause headaches for IT, with increased cost to support Macs as a result of increasing help desk calls due to file loss or corruption, or in some extreme cases, IT being forced to duplicate file resources to support Mac users. For Mac users, SMB/CIFS usage can impact worker productivity due to lost or corrupt files, as well as slow file browsing and searching.

Market Impact

The rise in BYOD is creating challenges for IT. Workers are increasingly asking to work anywhere, anytime, from any device, and pushing IT to support the varied array of devices they’d like to use. A recent ESG research survey of 601 senior IT decision makers at midmarket (i.e., 100 to 999 employees) and enterprise (i.e., 1,000 or more employees) organizations across North America and Western Europe found that more than two-thirds of organizations surveyed allow employees—to varying degrees—to use non-company provided devices to perform their primary job function.²

FIGURE 1. Enterprise BYOD Policies

Does your organization have a formal bring-your-own-device (BYOD) policy in place that allows employees to use a non-company provided (i.e., personal) endpoint device (e.g., laptop, smart phone, tablet, etc.) to perform their primary job function(s)? (Percent of respondents, N=601)



Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, 2015.

¹ SMB is the protocol used in modern Microsoft OS releases and replaced CIFS a number of years ago. The term CIFS is still often used by IT professionals to describe Windows file sharing protocols (even when SMB is used), thus the reference.

² Source: ESG Research Report, [2015 IT Spending Intentions Survey](#), February 2015.

Companies “born in the digital era” are more likely to allow for BYOD, with a whopping 87% allowing personal device use for the primary business function, so they face even greater challenges with device support.³ Specifically regarding the use of Mac and Windows in the enterprise, ESG research reveals that more and more IT shops are formally supporting both Macs and iOS devices. In fact, nearly two-thirds of IT organizations formally support both Windows and Mac desktops and laptops.⁴ This can create an IT support nightmare as the mix of device support increases, and IT organizations will be looking for solutions that can ease the pain of supporting mixed environments. That’s the key value driver for Acronis Access Connect. With Acronis Access Connect:

- IT can support Mac users in Windows environments with reduced risk of file corruption.
- Mac users get a native AFP experience, while Acronis Access Connect handles the nuances associated with translating file access, search, etc., to AFP.
- Mobile users also benefit, getting access to corporate files from their mobile devices with the same permissions they have when logging in from a Mac or PC.

Acronis Access Connect can help Macs and mobile devices seamlessly integrate into the enterprise. But it’s not the only mobile file access product in the Acronis arsenal. Acronis also offers an Acronis Access Advanced product that includes an array of configurable user and data management policies; SharePoint file access; web browser client and Mac/PC sync client access; and full enterprise file sync and share (EFSS) capabilities. Acronis Access Connect can operate as a standalone for mobile file access, or in conjunction with Acronis Access Advanced for more sophisticated mobile file management, including internal and external collaboration, automated content distribution, and DLP functionality to restrict data leakage into other apps through “open in,” the copy/paste of file contents, and other DLP-type functions.

The Bigger Truth

Acronis clearly understands the requirement to support a multitude of devices in the enterprise—from Macs to Windows PCs and laptops, and from iPads to Android phones—with secure data access and sharing. Acronis Access Connect is the hidden gem of the Acronis Access portfolio, providing an easy way to support Macs in the enterprise. The addition of mobile file access is a welcome one, given the employee BYOD push and the proliferation of mobile devices of all types and sizes in the enterprise.

Acronis Access Connect can help IT organizations streamline the onboarding process for Mac users; increase employee satisfaction with easy-to-use Mac and mobile file access tools; increase employee productivity by eliminating issues with data corruption and lost files when accessing Windows shares via Macs; and reduce help desk calls related to file access issues.

Mobile file management is a hot market with many competitors, but the Acronis Access suite is a powerful entry that can help organizations meet their corporate mobility goals related to empowering the workforce to work on any device, anywhere, at any time.

³ Source: Ibid.

⁴ Source: ESG Research Report, [The Endpoint Security Paradox](#), January 2015.

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