Macquarie University Protects Its People Through Better Crisis Communication

Macquarie University

Industry:
Education

Location:
Australia

Students/Staff:
40,000/5,000

Product:
BlackBerry® AtHoc®

Website:
https://www.mq.edu.au/

At a Glance

For Macquarie University, there is nothing more important than providing a safe environment. It's the main reason many international students choose to study at Australian universities. To help it provide that environment and enable the campus to be crisis-ready, Macquarie University partnered with BlackBerry.

The Challenge

The greatest danger in any crisis situation is a communications breakdown. The capacity to quickly disseminate information to everyone involved in a disaster is essential. It's the foundation not just of an effective emergency response, but of an organisation's efforts to meet the duty of care it has to its people.

Since Australia lacks a unified, centralised national emergency system like those found in the United States and Canada, it's up to individual organisations to determine the nature and scope of emergency alerts and communications. Macquarie University is among those leading the charge.

Macquarie University's Duty of Care

Located in the bustling heart of Australia's largest and fastest-growing technology park, Macquarie University is an international campus that is effectively the size of a small city. On its main campus alone, it brings together more than forty thousand students, 5,000 staff, and countless people from the surrounding community. On-site facilities are incredibly diverse, including numerous chemical labs and medical research facilities, a gym and pool, a high-tech library, a private teaching hospital, and the global head offices of several private organisations.

Macquarie University faces the same daily risks as any major educational institution. The university must be prepared to respond in the event of damage to infrastructure, flooding, fires, extreme weather, and human threats. It must also protect itself against cyber threats with the potential to impact the safety or security of both people and assets.

Additionally, Macquarie University is situated on the border of a major shopping district, and near several heavy-traffic areas. Any incidents that occur in those locations have the potential to overflow to the campus. There is also a large area of national park near the campus, and brushfires are a regular concern during summer.

To address these risks, Macquarie University maintains a comprehensive critical incident management plan that prioritises the privacy and safety of every single person associated with the institution. Effective communication is a cornerstone of this plan. That's why approximately seven years ago, leadership at the university set out to upgrade its crisis communication platform.

"The safety of staff and students is of the utmost importance," says Grant Sayer, Director of Infrastructure and Applications, Macquarie University Central IT Group. "Because we've got people coming and going on campus, we need to be able to reach them anywhere, and at any time. We can't know what devices they're carrying, so we also need to send emergency alerts through multiple channels."

Keeping Everyone in Touch

At the time, alerts were primarily sent via email and radio devices. This system was not feasible for large-scale communication – Macquarie University could not expect staff and students to carry a secondary device for the sole purpose of receiving crisis notifications, nor could it rely on single-channel alerts. There was also the matter of emergency services organisations and other external stakeholders, all of which maintain their own communications infrastructure.

Macquarie University needed to reach these groups while also connecting with its own people on their own devices.

More critically, it recognised that the platform it chose to achieve this must be highly intuitive, simple to maintain and operate, and easy to integrate with existing systems and policies. Operational delays of any kind were unacceptable for the university. Emergencies do not follow a set schedule, so Macquarie University needed a solution that was active and ready to use on a 24x7 basis.

"By deploying BlackBerry AtHoc in the cloud, we've given ourselves a great deal more flexibility in terms of user database numbers, integration of new solutions, and feature additions. As Macquarie University grows, AtHoc grows with us."

- John Durbridge,
Campus Security Manager,
Macquarie University

The university also sought a platform that aligned with its reputation for prioritising privacy and safety amongst its people. It needed a solution that could shield against cyber threats, securely store contact details, and protect both outgoing and incoming messages. This would allow the university to provide peace of mind for its users and also comply with regulations like Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Australia's Notification of Data Breach Policy.

After careful evaluation, Macquarie University chose a multimodal cloud deployment of BlackBerry® AtHoc®.

Complete Integration, Streamlined Communication, Total Coverage

Macquarie University has integrated BlackBerry AtHoc with both existing social channels and its RSS feed, allowing it to send messages through Twitter, Facebook, desktop notifications, the BlackBerry AtHoc mobile app, text, telephone, and email. This meshes well with the university's existing BYOD policy for faculty and staff, and also means the university can get the word out from a trusted source even amidst network interference. It also enables Macquarie University to reach the wider community and manage the spread of misinformation through branded messaging.

Students and staff choose how they want to be reached through a self-service portal, indicating what device, channel, or platform works best for them. This puts the power in the hands of Macquarie University's people, giving them ownership over their own security and helping them feel that much safer for it. The university has further enhanced the end-user experience by configuring the platform to use single-sign-on authentication alongside its other services.

To reach first responders, Macquarie University's security control center can cascade emergency alerts to the necessary agencies. It has also equipped the BlackBerry AtHoc mobile app with a feature known as a duress button. If an incident occurs that merits an immediate emergency response, security or staff can simply use the button.

As well as its own staff, students, and buildings, Macquarie University has a lot of private organisations headquartered on the campus and is surrounded by national parks, shopping centers, and freeways with heavy traffic. Each third-party organisation on and around Macquarie University's main campus has key people integrated into BlackBerry's crisis communication platform. Through these individuals, Macquarie University can notify joint partners of impending incidents while remaining focused on protecting its own people. Field staff, emergency personnel, and other stakeholders can respond back to alerts as needed with two-way communication, and the security control center can geographically situate alerts on campus and monitor the location of anyone who has given consent.

"BlackBerry AtHoc allows us to comprehensively meet the communication requirements of our crisis incident management plan," says John Durbridge, Campus Security Manager at Macquarie University. "To be able to communicate quickly, effectively, and in real time is absolutely critical in an emergency. We have a large-scale operation that requires a robust solution that can easily communicate across multiple channels with multiple people, and BlackBerry provides that."

"We work in an environment where the safety of students and staff is something that cannot be overlooked under any circumstances. We constantly seek ways to enhance our systems and better protect our campus and the people on it. Through our partnership with BlackBerry, we've been able to provide a solution that our leadership is comfortable with, easily developing and rolling out new initiatives to keep our campus safe, secure, and connected."

- John Durbridge,
Campus Security Manager, Macquarie University

BlackBerry AtHoc's auditing and logging allows the university to regularly re-visit and improve its crisis response process, and deploying in the cloud helps Macquarie University avoid investing in costly on-site infrastructure. This is all tied together by pre-populated templates built by Macquarie University's security team. With these templates, Macquarie University is able to quickly mount a response to whatever scenarios it faces.

Simple, Effective, Secure

Recently, Macquarie University experienced a flood due to a major plumbing failure. Through BlackBerry AtHoc, the university seamlessly provided information to all impacted faculty and students, rescheduled classes, coordinated repairs, and managed the situation amongst first responders. When the incident was resolved, it was then able to quickly let everyone know.

Macquarie University sought a solution that would allow quick, effective, real-time communication. It sought a robust, resilient multimodal crisis communication tool that would be easy to use for both its security control center and its user-base. A solution that could evolve and scale as the university did, enabling messages to reach the people who needed to see them without an unnecessary flood of notifications.

From the time Macquarie first identified BlackBerry AtHoc as that solution, BlackBerry has been both timely and supportive in cementing a partnership between the two organisations. With BlackBerry and AtHoc, Macquarie University is crisis ready.

About BlackBerry

BlackBerry (NYSE: BB; TSX: BB) provides intelligent security software and services to enterprises and governments around the world. The company secures more than 500M endpoints including 150M cars on the road today. Based in Waterloo, Ontario, the company leverages AI and machine learning to deliver innovative solutions in the areas of cybersecurity, safety and data privacy solutions, and is a leader in the areas of endpoint security management, encryption, and embedded systems. BlackBerry's vision is clear — to secure a connected future you can trust.

For more information, visit BlackBerry.com and follow @BlackBerry.

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