

## CASE STUDY

# Nation's Largest Private Real Estate Firm Finds Enhanced Security and Efficient Management with Fortinet

Across 13 states along the East Coast and into the Midwest, Howard Hanna Real Estate Services helps people buy their dream homes. Founded in Pittsburgh in 1957, the organization has grown to be the largest family owned real estate broker in the country. Its 15,000 agents ended 2023 with more than \$37 billion in closed sales. In addition, Howard Hanna has expanded over the years to include mortgage, insurance, and title and escrow companies.

"We do everything from the listing to the selling to the buying of homes," says Wes Davis, CIO. "We have commercial sales and offer property management, as well."

The company operates out of more than 400 offices, of which about 250 are supported by the corporate IT team. Many of these locations are small real estate offices, but others are much larger. Further complicating technology management, "We operate in a blended environment where our real estate agents primarily bring their own devices," says Gary Parker, network engineering manager. "The centralized IT team is responsible for about 3,000 endpoints across our 250 managed locations."

Howard Hanna's financial services businesses require the organization to hold clients' personal information, on top of standard financial, HR, and business data. "We face compliance requirements for every state we operate in," Parker says. A successful data breach could have major implications for the company's brand reputation, "not to mention the repercussions after we disclosed the breach to government agencies." Thus, security is a massive concern for the company's two dedicated network engineers, Parker and a colleague.

By 2017, Howard Hanna's IT infrastructure was making security management increasingly difficult. "We had a lot of aging hardware from multiple vendors," Parker explains. "Our company was growing quickly, which led to scalability concerns. On top of that, the value proposition for our legacy security stack drove us to look for another networking vendor."

## All-in on Fortinet

As the team conducted due diligence on potential providers, FortiGate Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs) caught their eye. "We were very impressed with the FortiGates, for their functionality, ease of management, and price," says Parker. "The standard subscription model for the FortiGates includes a lot of features that we did not have in our legacy environment: intrusion prevention, blacklisting, and service identification, in particular. Some capabilities required extra licensing fees and customized setups with our prior vendor, while others just were not available at the scale we needed."



*"No attack on our network has been successful since we moved to Fortinet."*

**Wes Davis**  
CIO,  
Howard Hanna Real Estate  
Services

## Details

**Customer:** Howard Hanna Real Estate Services

**Industry:** Real Estate

**Location:** Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## Business Impact

- No successful cyberattacks on the network since the first Fortinet rollout in 2017
- Threat response pushed out companywide in minutes rather than one or more days
- New locations brought up to corporate security standards in a couple of hours, vs. a couple of days in the legacy environment

"Having as many different companies as we have under our umbrella comes with challenges," he continues. "Because financial services companies are part of the business, we have to adopt best practices across all our locations. When we were shopping for firewalls, we were looking to standardize on highly secure technologies that would serve our entire umbrella of companies."

Howard Hanna decided to standardize on FortiGate NGFWs with the FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Unified Threat Protection (UTP) Bundle. Shortly after starting the NGFW rollout, the company also began replacing its legacy switches with FortiSwitch secure Ethernet switches. Over the past two years, it has added FortiAP access points to the mix, as well.

Now, most offices managed by corporate IT have a FortiGate NGFW, one or more FortiSwitches, and one or more FortiAP access points. "A handful of our smaller offices have FortiGate models that combine some of this functionality into a FortiWiFi unit, but our standard model includes a FortiGate, FortiSwitch, and FortiAP," Parker reports.

Parker and his colleague use the FortiManager management platform to oversee their firm's security fabric. "Our legacy environment was very distributed in terms of management," he says. "If we needed to look into an issue or make changes, we would have to remote into each box. Moving to FortiManager, where we can use a central pane of glass to manage everything, has been huge for us, and particularly when it comes to looking across our entire complement of security solutions to investigate an issue. For example, if a Wi-Fi user reports trouble, we can go into FortiManager to view the signal strength and device logs. Then we can trace the problem back up the stack to see whether there are issues elsewhere in that chain. And we can do it all using one platform, which greatly accelerates our ability to resolve the user's issue."

## Threat Response and Security Updates in Minutes, Not Days

Management centralization has also greatly improved the IT team's visibility into security events networkwide. "We log in to FortiManager, and we can see incidents and set up custom alerts," Parker explains. "Our FortiGates typically block every threat at the network perimeter. But if one were to get through, we would immediately see what the threat was and how we could go in and deploy countermeasures."

Adds Davis: "No attack on our network has been successful since we moved to Fortinet. Our last security incident was a couple of years ago, when somebody left a data closet open in an office that shared a stairwell with other businesses, and someone walked away with a domain controller. That is definitely not something the Fortinet Security Fabric could have prevented."

The increased effectiveness of security at Howard Hanna is partly a result of the fact that all the company's NGFWs are now running IPS, application control, and other key services. Security is also greatly enhanced by the FortiManager approach, enabling Parker's team to centrally deploy policies companywide.

"Fortinet enables us to be a lot more agile than we were before," he says. "If a new vulnerability is discovered, we can push out a new policy to every one of our managed locations within minutes. In the past, responding to the threat would have involved investigating ways to identify and fix it, then going to each individual device to take that action. Pushing out a simple change could consume a day or more of my time. And our number of sites has continued to grow. I cannot imagine managing this many locations with our legacy network and security infrastructure."

## Business Impact (cont.)

- Two dedicated network engineers manage network and security infrastructure serving 3,000 endpoints across 250 locations
- Day-to-day policy updates completed in minutes rather than hours or days
- Faster resolution of user connectivity issues through consolidated visibility into security networkwide

## Solutions

- FortiGate Next-Generation Firewall
- FortiSwitch
- FortiAP
- FortiWiFi
- FortiManager
- FortiCamera

## Services

- FortiGuard AI-Powered Security Services Unified Threat Protection Bundle

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### Gary Parker

Network Engineering Manager,  
Howard Hanna Real Estate  
Services



Day-to-day maintenance is similarly streamlined for the company's network engineers. "Some policies that we manage centrally within our data center require daily changes, while updates across our entire deployment happen once or twice a month, on average," Parker says. "But anytime we need to change a policy, we just update it and push it out to whatever devices need it. What used to take hours or days when we had to touch every device takes minutes with FortiManager."

## Fortinet Enables Howard Hanna to Keep IT Team Very Lean

For the rapidly growing organization, this efficiency is even more crucial in the onboarding of offices. Howard Hanna needs to bring new locations' technology infrastructure to company standards very quickly, both to maintain regulatory compliance and avoid the challenges of supporting a diverse IT environment. However, the company's legacy approach to folding a location into the corporate network involved a great deal of effort, with manual setup of each device and then manual changes on systems across the organization to accommodate the addition.

"The biggest challenge we have as an IT team is time to onboard," Parker says. "When we bring in a new company, we have to ensure their equipment meets the standards we have in place, as quickly as possible. Often that means replacing on-premises systems in all their locations with our standard package of Fortinet equipment. This used to be quite challenging, but now we have it down to a science. We use templates to configure our standard FortiGate firewall, FortiSwitch switch, and FortiAP access points, then ship them out. When they arrive, IT support staff can plug the devices in, and the job is done."

"Generally speaking, in our legacy environment, setting up a new office would take at least a day or two of an engineer's time, in person at the site," he continues. "With our new process, I have added four sites in a single day."

Parker adds that, "without a doubt," managing the rapid growth Howard Hanna has experienced in the past few years would have required the addition of more network and security engineers had the company not moved to Fortinet. "One of the reasons our IT team can be so lean is because of the Fortinet technology we have selected and the way we have implemented it. I do not think it would be possible with any other vendor for us to manage so many locations and this level of growth with only two dedicated engineers."

## "Almost Fully Engrossed in Fortinet"

Both Davis and Parker see Howard Hanna's relationship with Fortinet as a partnership rather than the traditional vendor interaction. "Fortinet is like an arm of our IT department," Davis says. "Our company gets assistance anytime we need it. No matter what the question might be, we will go to them to make sure we are optimizing our security."

"I cannot even count the number of times I have reached out to our Fortinet representatives," Parker adds. "I will ask them questions, and they will help me understand the risks we face and how to make our environment even more secure."

Howard Hanna recently expanded the partnership by deploying the FortiCamera video surveillance system in a few specific sites. "As time goes on, the more security solutions we can manage under the same umbrella, the better," he says. "When we started shopping for cameras, we looked at a lot of vendors. Choosing Fortinet made us comfortable that we were getting a top-quality solution. And we already knew the Fortinet security platform is compliant with financial services regulations, so we did not have to vouch for the entire stack all over again as we deployed cameras."

Davis concludes by describing his Fortinet conversion: "I was not a Fortinet fan before we started this process seven years ago," he says. "All my prior companies used a different vendor for firewalls and switches, and I was not sold on Fortinet at first. But when we tested the FortiGates, they performed much better than our legacy solutions, so migrating firewalls was an easy decision. Within about six months, we had bought FortiGates and FortiSwitches for the entire Virginia region. I went very quickly from not being interested in trying something new to being onboard with shifting our whole network to be almost fully engrossed in Fortinet."



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