

NATIONAL TRADING STANDARDS FIGHTS ONLINE SCAMS EFFICIENTLY WITH STREAMLINED FORENSIC AND INVESTIGATIVE WORKFLOWS



SUMMARY

Protecting the United Kingdom's consumers and businesses against online scams requires investigations into large volumes of digital evidence. The National Trading Standards eCrime Team replaced old-fashioned forensic tools and workflows with Nuix Workstation and Nuix Investigate®. This made it possible to:

- Give remote case investigators direct access to the contents of digital evidence sources without having to filter search requests through the forensic analysts
- Search across all relevant exhibits in one go from a single interface
- Streamline workflows and eliminate bottlenecks, allowing analysts to focus on forensic work rather than rote data processing and simple searching.



CHALLENGE

National Trading Standards is funded by central government and helps protect businesses and consumers in the United Kingdom from criminal activity in the areas of e-crime, mass marketing scams, doorstep crime, illegal money lending and other enforcement issues.

The National Trading Standards eCrime Team monitors and investigates online consumer and business fraud including website dating scams, misleading websites, subscription traps and online shopping fraud. The eCrime team serves as the central digital forensics evidence processing lab for a network of case investigators located across the country.

Given the nature of the crime, the majority of evidence involved in investigations comes from seized computers and other digital storage devices. Traditionally, forensic analysts would create forensic images of devices onsite and provide copies to the Trading Standards Officers who were investigating the case.

"Six years ago it may have been feasible to sit and wait for servers to finish imaging on site, but now we are typically dealing with five-terabyte RAID storage arrays; you could be waiting a day and a half," said Dave Childs, Forensic Lab Manager of the National Trading Standards eCrime Team.

These case officers were located in local authority offices across the United Kingdom. Getting their eyes on the data involved transferring physical hard drives around using secure couriers. The officers would then highlight relevant aspects of these evidence sources that required further investigation with forensic tools. The growing volumes and complexity of the digital evidence involved in each case made this work extremely difficult and inefficient. This workflow also caused long delays between evidence being obtained and case officers having access to it in order to progress their investigations.

The growth in data volumes also made it harder to find the relevant information, particularly because the case officers could not directly query the digital evidence. They would have to wait for the forensic analysts – who often had minimal knowledge of the facts of the case – to handle their search requests and report back on the findings.

"Keywords were problematic because they are uselessly broad," said Childs. "When we have multiple exhibits, there is no way for the case officers to search across them all as a single entity. In certain instances they ended up looking at the same material over and over again.

"What we really needed was to give the case officers an investigative tool that would provide a view into each exhibit so they could see if what they were looking for was likely to be there."



SOLUTION

In 2014, the National Trading Standards eCrime Team implemented a Nuix Lab featuring a high-speed digital evidence processing server using Nuix Workstation; local collaboration capabilities; and browser-based review using Nuix Investigate for its case officers based across the UK. Since then, the eCrime Team has acquired a second server for processing and is in the process of commissioning a third.

With this technology, after acquiring and verifying forensic images of each exhibit, the eCrime Team ingests those evidence sources into a Nuix case file. After handling irregular items such as encrypted files or non-text PDFs that need optical character recognition, the forensic specialists make the relevant files available to case officers.



RESULTS

DIRECT ACCESS TO DIGITAL EVIDENCE FOR CASE OFFICERS

For the National Trading Standards eCrime Team, the game-changing benefit of Nuix is enabling Trading Standards Officers, no matter where they are located, to search across multiple digital evidence sources from a single interface.

“Searching across multiple exhibits from a single user interface is really impressive,” said Childs. “For example, one case they mainly wanted to look at the email evidence but there were 60 different exhibits. So I took the email from each of those into a compound case and exported that out directly into [Nuix Investigate]. There’s nothing else in the forensic market that can do the same thing.

“Using Nuix our investigators are simply finding so much more evidence per case because it is such an accessible way to look. They might find 17,000 relevant files per case rather than the approximately 50 they would find previously.”

ELIMINATED PROCESS BOTTLENECKS

Processing exhibits in Nuix Workstation and making them available in Nuix Investigate has eliminated the long waiting period for case officers to view digital evidence. This has helped National Trading Standards get through cases faster.

“Previously, there was a long time from us receiving the evidence and the case officer getting anything they could use,” said Mike Andrews, National Coordinator of the National Trading Standards eCrime Team. “Nuix gives case officers much earlier sight of the evidence.

“Furthermore, by searching the data in [Nuix Investigate], the investigators are essentially triaging the evidence sources for the forensic analysts. It also takes pressure off the analysts, leaving them to focus on generating forensic reports based on the investigation done by the officers, rather than rote data processing.”

“The ability to script using any of the properties you can identify is a fantastic tool I use extensively,” adds Childs. “This helps me create forensic reports. I really like the way I can use scripting to get Nuix to do a lot of the reporting work for me.”

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

To further streamline its workflows, the eCrime Team is looking at ways to triage different sources and types of evidence before putting them through processing.

“It will be a good way to improve our workflow but within the constraint that we meet the disclosure obligations set out by the Attorney General’s office or the Association of Chief Police Officers guidelines,” said Andrews. “We’re looking to automate some of our workflows in a way that records and explains the steps we took.”

ABOUT NATIONAL TRADING STANDARDS

National Trading Standards is funded by the UK Government and was set up in 2012 to provide leadership, influence, support, and resources to help combat consumer and business detriment nationally, regionally and locally. It brings together trading standards representatives from England and Wales to prioritize, fund and coordinate national and regional enforcement cases. nationaltradingstandards.uk

For more information, visit
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