

Impact of Firewall on Technology Business

Pakistan exports around 3 billion USD in IT and related services per year. While this number is negligible in global IT services, every billion dollars in exports is critical for a country like Pakistan. It is also the lifeline for thousands of families, where these digital workers are bringing in a dollar-based income source, significantly improving their livelihoods.

Pakistan's recent upgrade or testing of a new firewall has severely impacted businesses, not only in the IT sector but also in traditional businesses that rely on the internet for digital security, logistics, team collaboration, etc.

Delivery boys delivering items purchased online, freelancers providing services, software companies delivering services to their customers, and BPOs trying to provide customer support remotely or sell something to an international customer have all been impacted by the careless implementation of this new firewall or web management system.

Pakistan always had a basic firewall that would limit websites and block IP addresses. This upgrade of the existing firewall aims to perform a more detailed inspection of the traffic going through its system.

The main issue with the implementation of this new system was the lack of communication and involvement of all stakeholders, including the industry. All the existing work done on connectivity for call centers and BPOs was also bypassed.

There was no sandbox testing to assess the new system on a few networks or a subset of users.

The inspection of traffic by the new system resulted in traffic choking, as the system was likely conducting a complete analysis of all traffic passing through. The local caches (CDNs) deployed by local mobile networks also couldn't be utilized, as end users started using VPNs, which further stressed the network.

Freelancers using platforms like Upwork and Fiverr resorted to VPNs since many of them were working on social media platforms. VPNs that don't use dedicated IP addresses are risky. These freelancing platforms suspended accounts due to location changes caused by VPN usage. This resulted in a negative reputation for the country's internet and

freelancers. The issue cannot be blamed on individual freelancers or the use of VPNs, as the fundamental problem was the slow internet and connection issues that necessitated VPN usage.

Companies using video meeting platforms like Zoom reported unstable internet connections. This affected the global perception of these companies, as a reliable internet connection is key to getting anything done.

BPO companies, which make thousands of calls per day, experienced call distortions and drops, affecting their sales efforts as these companies rely on pitching products to customers.

The biggest challenge in Pakistan when implementing such systems is that a majority of our traffic goes outside the country. This results in more load on the system and slower traffic. While the government may have fundamentally decided to implement such a system, the key is to involve stakeholders, communicate with the industry, and create a whitelist for all stakeholders so that software companies, their remote employees, BPOs, and registered freelancers with PSEB are not affected.

The internet is essential for all software businesses, and any such endeavor in the future should be carefully executed, as the loss to businesses cannot be easily calculated. Our freelancers and companies put in a lot of effort to maintain their profiles and reputations with customers. We should protect these businesses as they are currently the only promising and growing sector providing jobs to thousands of our young people.



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About the Author: *Barkan Saeed, the founder and CEO of Vizteck Solutions (vizteck.com), has led the company for 17 years. He has held prominent roles as the Chairman of the Pakistan Software Houses Association and as a board member of the Pakistan Software Export Board. Barkan has been instrumental in shaping Special Technology Zone Policies and has significantly contributed to the development of industry training programs for university students during his tenure on the Prime Minister's Task Force on IT.*