

City and County Healthcare Group consolidates servers



Building a cloud-ready infrastructure with IBM System x and System Storage technologies

Overview

Business challenge

With rapid business expansion through acquisitions and organic growth, City and County Healthcare Group wanted to redesign its IT infrastructure. Local servers at branch offices were becoming harder to manage as the company's geographical reach expanded, so the lean IT team wanted to find an easier way to maintain availability and performance for core business applications by developing on a robust and scalable centralised platform.

Solution

Great Benefit, an IBM® Business Partner, helped the IT team consolidate more than 30 HP production servers onto just seven IBM System x3650 servers, hosted at a Virtustream data centre. These servers provide central and branch offices with web-based access to the company's Microsoft® based systems, such as Exchange for email, and support the new care management system, PeoplePlanner. Three System x3400 servers and an IBM System Storage® DS3300 disk system were also implemented as a disaster recovery platform.

City and County Healthcare Group (CCH) is one of the UK's largest and fastest growing providers of community-based care, providing support services that help people live independently in their own homes. The company (trading as London Care, Sterling Homecare, Guardian Homecare, Quality Care Services, Custom Care and Careline) generates revenues of approximately £50 million per year.

CCH initially operated in and around the London area, but following a number of major corporate acquisitions, it has recently extended its geographical reach across England and Northern Ireland. This expansion is already opening up significant opportunities for the business – as well as creating a number of challenges from the IT perspective.

“Our IT strategy was based on our original business model, which involved a relatively small number of branch offices all located close to each other in the London area,” explains Clement Solis, IT Manager at CCH. “We had a variety of servers at each office, running an Oracle-based application for care management, as well as Novell NetWare and GroupWise email. These servers all connected to central systems at head office. The benefit of this architecture was that it allowed us to operate with a relatively low-cost network infrastructure, but it had a very high management overhead.”

“However, as the business grew, we found we were maintaining a large number of aging, unreliable servers across an increasingly large geographical area. We try to keep our IT team as lean as possible, but achieving an acceptable level of uptime was impossible – the team was spending almost all its time travelling from one site to another just to keep the servers up and running. We wanted to find a better solution that would be more scalable as the business expanded, and decided to rethink our entire IT landscape.”



Business Benefits

- Reduces the total number of production servers by more than 75 percent, delivering proportionate savings on software licensing and hosting costs
 - Standardises and centralises the server estate, simplifying maintenance and reducing the need for busy IT staff to travel from site to site
 - Provides a much more scalable architecture for future business growth, with the ability to take advantage of Virtustream cloud hosting services for additional capacity
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Moving to web-based systems

The company decided to replace its Oracle and Novell software with a set of Microsoft solutions: Windows for file and print services, Exchange for email, and SQL Server as the basis for a new web-based care management application, PeoplePlanner (www.peopleplanner.biz).

“The choice of an application that could be accessed over the internet was important, because it enabled us to remodel our infrastructure,” comments Clement Solis. “We wouldn’t need servers at each office, and we would be able to centralise everything at a single data centre – making it much easier to manage and support.”

To help with the design and implementation of the new infrastructure, CCH turned to Great Benefit, an IBM Business Partner.

“The Great Benefit team proposed an IBM server and storage architecture that promised to meet all of our requirements, and they were highly recommended by other companies with similar implementations,” says Mark Harrison, Group Finance Director. “Their close relationship with IBM also meant that we would be able to access some of the top IBM hardware experts if we ran into any problems. As a result, we were very confident that they would be the right partner for this project.”

Cloud computing on System x

Great Benefit worked closely with the in-house IT team to implement seven new IBM System x3650 M3 servers to run the company’s production systems. Each server has two Intel® Xeon® 5600 processors and memory ranging from 32 to 64 GB, depending on the applications it is running. The main applications run on dedicated servers, while Microsoft HyperV is used to run a number of virtual environments that support monitoring applications, a BlackBerry server, some web servers including Microsoft SharePoint Foundation, and other smaller systems.



Solution Components

Software

- IBM® Systems Director

Servers

- IBM System x3650 M3
- IBM System x3400
- IBM System Storage® DS3300

IBM Business Partner

- Great Benefit
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— Mark Harrison, Group Finance Director, City and County Healthcare Group

All seven machines are hosted at a central Virtustream data centre, and the old local servers are now in the process of being decommissioned. As a result, the company’s IT team no longer needs to travel between locations to manage the server estate – in fact, most maintenance operations can be carried out remotely from corporate headquarters.

“We have installed IBM Systems Director on all the servers and this helps us to be far more proactive as a team in terms of remote management,” says Mark Harrison. “Moreover, the Virtustream data centre is a top-class facility, and gives us confidence that our systems and data are secure. Another advantage is Virtustream’s cloud computing services: if we need to expand the environment in future, the ability to grow into the cloud is a very attractive option. The staff from both Great Benefit and Virtustream worked seamlessly together as an extension of our internal IT department, making the launch of the new systems extremely effective.”

Resilient and efficient

Great Benefit has also helped CCH build a disaster recovery solution, which replicates data from the Virtustream site to three System x3400 servers and a System Storage DS3300 disk system based at head office. In the event of an outage on one of the main servers, the company can fail over temporarily to these systems to maintain availability until repairs are completed.

“Overall, the resilience of our infrastructure has been dramatically improved,” comments Mark Harrison. “We used to have servers failing almost daily. Now we’re seeing perpetual uptime of virtually 100 percent. Performance is excellent too, so we should be able to grow considerably in the near future without any need for further investment in hardware.”

When all the old servers have been retired, CCH will have reduced its total server estate by more than 75 percent – even though it will be supporting more than twice the number of users after the acquisitions are incorporated into the new group infrastructure. Fewer servers equates to lower electricity and air conditioning requirements, and less rack space in the hosting centre – all adding up to lower operational expenditure for the business. Equally, for software that is licensed on a per-server or per-processor basis, the costs will be reduced proportionately.

“IBM and Great Benefit have helped us create an infrastructure that is more manageable, more cost-effective, and significantly more scalable,” concludes Mark Harrison. “For a fast-growing company like CCH, this delivers vital advantages in terms of business agility: whether we make further acquisitions or simply continue growing organically, we will be able to extend our IT systems seamlessly and sustainably, without increasing operational costs. Most importantly though, by having these effective back office systems in place, we can dedicate more resources to supporting our staff on the front line who are providing the care services. Our focus is now to be proactive with technology, and we are looking forward to working with IBM in the future.”

For more information

To learn more about IBM System x servers, contact your IBM sales representative or visit: ibm.com/systems/uk/x

To learn more about products, services and solutions from Great Benefit, visit: greatbenefit.com

To learn more about City and County Healthcare Group, visit: www.candhealthcare.co.uk



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