Insurer Boosts Data Center Efficiency and Agility

Helvetia optimizes European operations, reducing risk, time, and cost for integrating acquisitions and achieving regulatory compliance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customer Name: Helvetia

Industry: Financial Services

Location: Switzerland

Number of Employees: 4500

Challenge
· Integrate newly acquired companies and regulatory compliance requirements, faster and at lower cost
· Consolidate to one high availability platform and deliver IT efficiency benefits

Solution
· Created standardized and centralized data center model that was more scalable and agile than existing distributed approach

Results
· Better IT alignment to drive sales, customer retention, and mergers and acquisitions
· Average provisioning times halved
· Virtualization increased from 65% to 85%, reducing server racks from 6 to 0.5

Challenge

In over 150 years, Helvetia Group has grown from a number of Swiss and foreign insurance companies into a successful insurance group that does business in selected European countries. Today, Helvetia is one of Switzerland's leading insurance providers. Headquartered in St. Gallen, the group has 4900 employees and over 2.5 million customers. Delivering profitable growth, domestically and internationally, is a top priority. Helvetia is looking to increase market share in Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Spain, Austria, and France by growing its profitable non-life, occupational benefits insurance, and cyclical reinsurance businesses.

The insurance market continues to be highly competitive. Since the recession in 2008, companies operating amid a volatile and unpredictable market have been forced to focus on rebuilding their capital base and renewing the confidence of their stakeholders, while handling an increasingly complex regulatory environment.

These turbulent times have led to a sharper focus on risk management and balance sheet strengthening. Rapid growth, organically and through acquisition, had created a fragmented estate of data centers, which housed multiple infrastructures and applications. Information lived in different systems. In addition, there was no real common IT practice across all European countries. This approach did not align with Helvetia's IT strategy.

"We had over 600 physical servers, many of which were underutilized because they were supporting individual products, or business applications on a dedicated basis," says Michael Welte, head of client server operations for Helvetia. "Each country used a different provider to manage data center operations. As well as not being fully efficient, this approach was difficult to scale and manage, which added both time and cost to the integration of newly acquired businesses, for example."

In addition to being expensive to run, this distributed IT model was also labor intensive. Having a mix of vendor server technologies meant that Helevtia's operational teams had to maintain multiple knowledge pools and different sets of procedures and documentation. "Completing moves, adds, and changes was very time consuming." says Welte. "There was also the considerable expense of maintaining different technical procedures and in-house skills needed to deal with multiple vendors. Just commissioning a new service, with a guaranteed level of availability, could tie up three people for a whole day."

> "The Cisco UCS system uses Intel next-generation processing technology, which boosts the amount of applications that can be hosted per blade. It's also pre-integrated to work with VMware from day one and comes with automation tools, reducing risk and speeding migration."

Michael Welte
Head of Client Server Operations
Helevtia

Solution

With the vision of creating a common and standardized IT model, Helvetia turned to its trusted partner Cisco. Over the years, the two companies had worked together on various IP networking projects and, more recently, a refresh of Helvetia's storage area networking technology.

"Cisco data center specialists arranged a strategic workshop to share their experiences gained on similar projects," says Welte. "We discussed various issues and approaches, including different ways of addressing server sprawl, the latest thinking around virtualized data centers, and emerging concepts like Virtual Desktop Infrastructure."

Following the workshop, Helvetia revised its initial plan to migrate to rack-mounted servers in favor of a blade server approach, offering lower footprint, increased density, and greater environmental impact.

In subsequent meetings between Cisco and Helvetia technical teams, distinct advantages emerged in using the Cisco Unified Computing System™ (UCS™), a key component within Cisco® Unified Data Center, the Cisco roadmap for data center transformation.

"What we liked about the Cisco solution is that it combines server, network, storage, and virtualization and allows us to manage them as a single cohesive system," says Welte. "We found that with Cisco UCS innovations around Intel® Xeon® processor technology, we were able to boost the number of applications that we could host per blade beyond what was achievable with alternative platforms. And since it was designed from the outset to be the optimal platform for VMware, we completed our migration quickly and with very little risk"

Results

The Cisco UCS platform helped Helevtia to accelerate and de-risk its strategy of moving to one central data center in Switzerland. "Being an early adopter of any new technology always carries additional risk," says Welte. "What really impressed us was the support we received. There were surprisingly few issues and this was down to the commitment of the local Cisco team on the ground in Switzerland. They got close to our engineers and provided a vital bridge back to the Cisco development group, allowing problems to be solved in flight."

At a business level, the project will help optimize the insurer's European operations. Having faster and improved access to new sales tools and product information will help the group to drive revenue, not just from winning more new business, but also by achieving more efficient renewals and higher customer retention. Helvetia can respond quicker and more cost-effectively to changes in regulatory compliance. Having a common data center approach also accelerates and lowers the cost of integrating people, processes, and systems associated with future acquisitions.

Helvetia can deliver services faster and more cost-effectively. With extended memory and built-in Intel processing power, the solution can rapidly scale to support 1000 virtual machines (VMs). It will initially host and manage 450 VMs, with just a few servers remaining in each in-country data centre to support local applications.

Among the mission-critical applications already migrated to UCS are Lotus Notes, Archive, Document Management, Microsoft SQL, and various application servers. Helevtia is currently virtualizing Web Application Center and Print and File services using Cisco UCS to form one server infrastructure.
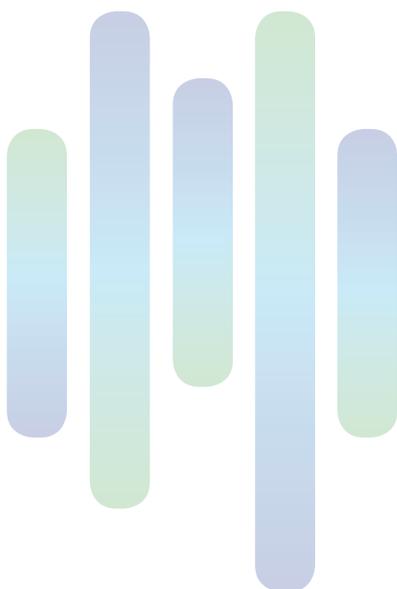
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A complicated vendor matrix has been replaced with a much simpler management approach. It no longer takes days to locally upgrade system by system. Now a UCS blade server can be patched from one central point in just a few hours. Also, because Cisco UCS is pre-wired and pre-configured, and uses a unified management toolset, manual effort is significantly reduced, allowing better use of scarce IT resources and simplifying operational processes. Having a single integrated platform has helped to increase the availability of IT services, typically to levels of 99.999%.

Virtualization levels have increased from 65% to 85% (expected to rise to 95% shortly). This has enabled Helvetia to save space and consolidate from 6 to 0.5 server racks. Cisco UCS has also helped increase agility, with the average time taken to provision a server reducing from six to three weeks.

Next Steps

Further efficiencies are anticipated as Helvetia takes advantage of the programmable management features of UCS. These features allow standard templates to be created, facilitating even faster provisioning and embedding business and IT policies within an automated management and regulatory framework. The original Cisco UCS investment could also be re-used to create a private cloud environment, or to centralize employee desktops, applications, and data through the implementation of Virtual Desktop Infrastructure.

PRODUCT LIST

Data Center

- Cisco Unified Computing System: comprising Cisco UCS B230 M2 and Cisco UCS B440 M2 Blade Servers powered by the Intel® Xeon® processor E7 family*

*Top-of-the-line Intel Xeon processor E7-8800/4800/2800 product families are designed for your critical business needs