Insurance Provider Improves Scalability and Enhances Services

Executive Summary

- **Customer Name:** AmWINS Group, Inc.
- **Industry:** Insurance
- **Location:** Charlotte, North Carolina, USA
- **Number of Employees:** 2300+

Challenge
- Unifying data center and branch operations
- Improving network scalability and reliability
- Delivering higher-value services to employees and clients

Solution
- Standardize data center and branch IT infrastructure
- Manage network, compute, storage, and virtualization via single pane of glass
- Expand memory and virtualization

Results
- Effectively virtualized 95 percent of all operating systems
- Achieved up to five times faster email and data retrieval times
- Reduced server rack space requirements by two-thirds, while cutting power consumption costs

AmWINS Group, Inc. transforms data center to deliver reliable, accelerated services and communications.

Challenge

At the core of today's businesses, companies are faced with a fundamental business decision: either to make cuts to help ensure survival and overcome difficult economic conditions or to challenge convention, drive growth, and innovate to position themselves for future successes. For AmWINS, the decision was clear to not only drive growth organically, but also to strategically acquire more specialized insurance providers to expand its markets and enhance its catalog of insurance policy offerings.

AmWINS is a visionary in specialty insurance distribution that manages over US $6.7 billion in insurance premiums annually. With its aggressive growth model, the company saw its IT landscape, infrastructure, and software footprint become a patchwork of disparate technology that could potentially create barriers between staff, customers, and positive business relationships.

As a result, the company wanted to standardize its data center with a single, unified system that would smoothly integrate with office-based networks located across 21 countries. Additionally, AmWINS wanted to boost its email capabilities to provide users up to 50 GB of storage (more than double its previous capacity) to help deliver superior services and information faster to its clients.

"After examining technology across the market, we chose Cisco because it provided a more complete, rapidly scalable solution that would help us work more efficiently."

– Thaddeus Worsnop
Senior Network Engineer
AmWINS Group, Inc.

"Email is a critical component to our overall service model," says Thaddeus Worsnop, senior network engineer at AmWINS. "A higher-performance infrastructure would enable our staff to reliably communicate with clients, research policy information, and provide higher-level services. If we don't have leading-edge technology to support those objectives, we are opening the door to several logistical challenges."

The company also wanted to further support its shift from a traditional one-server, one-application-based model and expand virtualization to better utilize its IT assets. By doing so, AmWINS saw an opportunity to better optimize resources, reduce the total cost of ownership for its infrastructure, and increase network reliability, while improving services available to employees and clients.

In addition, as AmWINS looks toward the future, it wants the flexibility to deliver business-critical applications, such as AmLINK, the company's proprietary policy and billing system, via tablet and mobile devices to improve broker productivity and experiences.

Solution

AmWINS employed the Cisco Unified Computing System™ (UCS™) to improve the firm's operational efficiency, flexibility, and agility to meet its changing business demands. Cisco® UCS gives the company a unified platform to integrate networking, computing, storage access, and virtualization across data centers and to deploy mission-critical applications faster and more securely. "After evaluating other solutions, it was clear that Cisco provided both the technology and the vision to help us achieve our efficiency and service standards," Worsnop says. "Cisco UCS provides a more complete, scalable environment for cost-effectively delivering better services to our employees and customers."

The unified network includes Cisco UCS B200 M2 Blade Servers residing in Cisco 5100 Chassis at the company's data centers. The blade servers attach to Cisco UCS 6120XP Fabric Interconnects to form the communications backbone for the data center and become part of a single, highly available management domain. Cisco fabric interconnects provide both network connectivity and management capabilities for all attached blades and to the chassis in the data centers, streamlining network management and accelerating troubleshooting. The company's primary and secondary data centers are united through a Cisco ASR 1000 Series Aggregation Services Router, providing much-needed redundancy and failover capacity for disaster recovery.

The integrated system provides both the LAN and SAN connectivity for all blades within its domain to integrate secure, rapid data storage and retrieval delivered via Cisco Nexus® 5000 Series and Nexus 2000 Series switches. "One key advantage that Cisco offered was the opportunity to accelerate our data center migration from 1 GB to 10 GB networking through UCS Fabric Managers, even before Cisco Nexus switches were deployed in the data center," says Worsnop.

For branch offices, AmWINS standardized on Cisco UCS C200 and C210 M2 Servers and Cisco 2960 Series Switches to provide secure data, voice, and video communications for staff members. In tandem with the Cisco IronPort® Email Security Appliance, integrated SSL clients, and Cisco ASA 5585-X Adaptive Security Appliance, connected to an EMC SAN, the company is helping to ensure that communications across devices remain secure and confidential between offices and with clients.

The entire network is centrally managed using Cisco UCS Manager. From a single command console, AmWINS' IT staff can deploy, monitor, and manage all hardware, software, and virtualization components. The centralized management enables rapid provisioning of applications and infrastructure from shared pools of computing, storage, and network resources. "The model-based service profiles make it easier for junior engineers to provision new deployments, which enables our more experienced engineers to focus on more strategic initiatives," says Worsnop. "This environment virtually eliminates production bottlenecks."

Results

Simple, virtualized networking

Integral to the success of data center operations at AmWINS has been the ability for staff to virtualize much of its infrastructure. By adopting Cisco UCS solutions and leveraging VMware ESX, the company has effectively virtualized 95 percent of its operating systems that run hundreds of applications on a much smaller footprint, despite the company's aggressive growth.

The increased scalability and flexibility offered by Cisco UCS solutions have provided AmWINS with the needed infrastructure to support its rapid growth. For instance, the company gained more than 700 new employees during a recent acquisition, bringing the total number of employees to over 2300.

With Cisco UCS, the IT team can now rapidly allocate physical and virtual assets to meet the company's growing needs. Previously, deploying a new business productivity application could take as long as three days, including purchasing a physical server and then coding the associated SQL server. "We used to spend a lot of money rushing hardware in overnight so we could code applications on multiple boxes," says Worsnop. "Integrating Cisco UCS with VMware has reduced application deployment time to one hour because we can automate the server builds and QA processes, or even prepare the deployment before the hardware arrives for greater efficiency."

As the company has grown, the data center within AmWINS continues to be lean. While offering comparable computing and networking power as its previous solutions, Cisco UCS has helped to consolidate server space by one-third. In turn, the company has significantly reduced its power consumption, using only four 208-amp power modules versus its previous twenty 120-amp modules, and associated real estate costs.

Greater mobility, security, disaster recovery

Using an integrated array of Cisco products to support its cloud environment, the company's IT team has eliminated the need to patch together third-party products, resulting in increased efficiencies. For example, with Cisco IronPort Cloud Email for relays, outbound emails are sent three to five times faster than with previous exchanges and relays. "Seconds can mean a big difference in closing a sale in the insurance business," says Worsnop.

The speed and flexibility of Cisco solutions have also helped AmWINS expand its disaster recovery efforts by enabling IT to rapidly identify and respond to network events faster than previously possible. By leveraging server identities within service profiles, the company can quickly reallocate assets to maintain service levels and create smoother experiences for users.

Product List

Data Center Solutions
- Cisco Unified Computing System Servers
- Cisco UCS B200 M2 Blade Servers
- Cisco UCS C200 M2 Servers
- Cisco UCS C210 M2 Servers
- Fabric Interconnects
- Cisco UCS 6120XP Fabric Interconnects

Routing and Switching
- Cisco Nexus 5548UP Switches
- Cisco Nexus 2248TP Fabric Extenders
- Cisco MDS 9124 Fabric Switches
- Cisco ASR 1001 Routers
- Cisco Catalyst® 2960 Series Switches

Network Management
- Cisco Unified Computing System Manager

Security and VPN
- Cisco IronPort Email Security Appliance
- Cisco ASA 5585-X Adaptive Security Appliance

Applications
- Microsoft Exchange 2010
- Microsoft SQL Server

Additionally, moving linked data across ASR routers is a big benefit during disaster recovery testing, because IP addressing is maintained at secondary locations. The Cisco Adaptive Security Appliance, which provides eight times the protection of other products, along with its Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) mobility client, has given the company superior remote connectivity to its Cisco IOS Software device users, meeting the needs of an increasingly mobile workforce.

Better services, better value

The Cisco system not only enables AmWINS employees to work better, but also helps the company's entire network infrastructure run faster and more reliably. With Cisco UCS, email access and delivery is faster and more efficient, and disaster recovery is more effective. Email is the lifeblood of AmWINS' operations, with 2300 employees each requiring as much as 50 GB of space, plus two additional backups of the email files.

Cisco's Fiber Channel over Ethernet (FCOE) provides a 10 GB connection between Cisco UCS and Microsoft Exchange to expand bandwidth and accelerate data transfer, while email backups are automated through integration with the company's EMC storage capabilities for instant, dependable recovery. "Running our Exchange servers over Cisco UCS and implementing flash drives, we increased memory and processing speeds threefold," Worsnop says. "Instead of waiting 90 seconds for a large email file to download, it can now be loaded in less than 30 seconds."

At AmWINS, implementing Cisco UCS has further strengthened the company's position as an industry leader, enabling a burgeoning workforce to perform at top speed to execute complex insurance transactions faster than the competition.

Next Steps

In the future, AmWINS network engineers are confident that they will be able to support future organic business growth and growth driven by acquisitions. Leveraging Cisco UCS, IT managers can quickly scale both virtualized and physical environments to meet business needs without affecting service. "Environments built on Cisco UCS offer an ideal solution for AmWINS to continue its aggressive growth—enabling us to deliver critical business applications and services to employees and clients at virtually a moment's notice," says Worsnop.

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco Unified Computing, visit: www.cisco.com/go/ucs.
To find out more about Cisco Nexus Switches, visit: www.cisco.com/go/nexus.
To see how Cisco integrates with Microsoft technologies, visit: www.cisco.com/go/microsoft.
To find out more about Cisco Unified Data Center, visit: www.cisco.com/go/unifieddatacenter.

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