

Accountancy firm solves a host of problems with Cloud Services



UHY Haines Norton is an association of independent accountancy firms in Australia and New Zealand with a global reach via UHY International. From offices in eight major centres, the organisation provides its clients with straightforward, practical and cost efficient accounting, business and audit services.

One of the association's firms is located in Sydney and employs a staff of over 50.

IT refresh cycle causes a rethink

Three years ago the Sydney office was due for an IT refresh. Servers were ageing and due for replacement. Internal software systems were over five years old and needed to be updated to remain current with the latest industry functionality.

An increasingly paperless accounting environment was creating new demands that weren't fully catered for by the current system. Rather than maintaining physical files, the office had switched to the far more efficient practice of scanning incoming documents and saving them in digital format. This made it far easier to access and share documents, and optimised office space. Unfortunately such practices had also greatly diminished the office's digital storage capacity.

Nick Ferrara, Senior Accountant and IT Manager for UHY Haines Norton Sydney explains, "We were faced with having to move from Windows 2003 to Windows 2010 and add an extra storage area network (SAN). At the time, the SAN alone would have cost \$50,000 and then there would have been all the add-on costs to fix the system up and keep us going. We couldn't justify it for an old system."

The alternative was equally prohibitive: to replace all hardware and software at a cost in excess of \$300,000.

Analysing the numbers

Ferrara put his accounting mindset to work and analysed all of the company's costs at a per user/per month level. "I was astonished by the amount of money we were spending on IT, especially on an old system. Once a system becomes old, a lot of the maintenance becomes more expensive because in the first three years, it is covered by the license and maintenance. After that costs start to escalate. I saw straight away that what we had was costing us a fortune."

Next, he did the same calculations based on a complete IT overhaul and compared the costs with cloud or hosted IT services. "I did my homework and spoke to other users of similar services. I looked at various hosted solutions with the big providers and last of all, I spoke to Professional Advantage," Ferrara says.



At a glance

Company

UHY Haines Norton

Problem

UHY Haines Norton needed to find a way to update and upgrade its IT systems, and introduce greater scalability without incurring prohibitive costs.

Solution

Professional Advantage private cloud services

Benefits

- Hosted IT services enabled a complete IT upgrade without requiring a prohibitive upfront investment
- The firm's professionally qualified accountants have more time to focus on billable hours rather than on maintaining their IT systems
- Storage capacity and the number of users can grow to meet business needs without constraint

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He found that a hosted service could be provided at a reasonable price without the upfront expenditure of a new system. It would provide the office greater security and include two things that to date had been missing from the firm's IT systems: redundancy and disaster recovery capabilities. There were other benefits as well. "One of our divisions is Audit. They get involved in tenders with government departments where there are stringent requirements as to how systems are run and how security is handled. Having a more robust and secure data centre setup would give us an extra ability with these clients."

Keen to choose a partner that would deliver personal service, Ferrara opted for a private cloud service from Professional Advantage. "We'd been working with Professional Advantage for more than ten years, so it was obvious we couldn't go too wrong in terms of the trust factor. After all, I wasn't going to outsource our IT to someone we didn't have a strong relationship with. Cost obviously comes into it, and at the end of the day, we also had to go with someone we trusted." Ferrara says.

Building support

The concept of an outsourced or cloud service took some time to sell to other managers within the firm. Not everyone was familiar with the model and Ferrara had to spend time explaining the plan to allay any fears. "I could see where those fears were coming from," Ferrara acknowledges. "Our livelihood depends on the data and if it were to go astray, there would be a huge impact on the business."

To alleviate concerns, Ferrara and Professional Advantage adopted a two month transition, switching one application at a time to the cloud. This allowed staff to gradually become comfortable with the new platform, and allowed the project team to quickly resolve any issues arising from the transition.

By the end of the two months staff were completely confident with the environment and Professional Advantage had taken over the running of all of UHY Haines Norton's software, including financial and auditing solutions, and a variety of accounting-specific packages.



Backup and recovery procedures had been put in place and system snapshots were being conducted twice per day for extra recovery peace of mind.

"We have flexibility now... We can grow as we need."

Time is money

In the past, Ferrara, along with the support of a junior staff member, had been the first port of call for any IT problem in the office. Whenever a problem occurred, Ferrara would try to troubleshoot and if all efforts failed, he would call in Professional Advantage. "Every hour that I spent working on the system was an hour of lost billings. If the entire system went down, we were potentially losing \$150 per hour, per staff member. With 53 staff we could have bought a new system with the money otherwise lost through billable hours," Ferrara notes.

Following the move to the cloud, however, the bulk of system maintenance and support became a Professional Advantage responsibility. As a consequence, Ferrara gained more time to attend to clients. When the junior staff member decided to move on, Ferrara realised there was no longer a need to appoint a replacement.

"Ultimately I'm hoping to increase my own billable hours by at least 20 per cent in the next 12 months," he says.

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More capacity, more functionality and more client services

Over the past year, the relationship between Professional Advantage and UHY Haines Norton has deepened. Ferrara notes that Professional Advantage has become more familiar with the firm's system. "It means they are on the ball if there are any problems. The help desk is able to resolve issues instantaneously, so we're saving time."

UHY Haines Norton's increased IT capacity has brought new vigour to the firm's IT planning. With more storage and functionality, Ferrara is busy looking for ways that IT can add value to the business. "We want to be more efficient by utilising what we have. We're looking at other software and ways to further reduce paper," he says.

A new web portal is high on Ferrara's priorities. He wants to use the website to provide clients access to their own data, thus streamlining communication with accountants. He's also looking at creating a Dropbox facility to handle the transfer of large files, thus removing the need for clients to courier USB sticks or CDs of information. Other plans include a document management system and the capacity to deal with electronic signatures.

"We have flexibility now. We don't have to worry about running out of room or about having to spend \$50,000 to buy a new SAN. We can grow as we need," Ferrara adds.

"We don't specialise in IT so why should we try to be IT experts?...Cloud services have taken us hopefully to the next generation. It's given us a way to cater for future growth. Now we can add services on as we need them whereas in the past changes incurred a high infrastructure overhead."

Twelve months since initiating the host services relationship with Professional Advantage, Ferrara remains enthusiastic about life in the private cloud. "We don't specialise in IT so why should we try to be IT experts? We outsource everything else. If we need special advice on legal matters, we go to a lawyer. It's the same with IT. Cloud

services have taken us hopefully to the next generation. It's given us a way to cater for future growth. Now we can add services on as we need them whereas in the past changes incurred a high infrastructure overhead," he concludes.

About Professional Advantage

Professional Advantage focuses on providing technology and services that enable high-performance workplaces and organisations. Professional Advantage was established in 1989 and today employs more than 230 people in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, London and Fargo, USA. The company is the largest provider of leading brand global business management systems such as financial management, ERP, CRM, retail, business intelligence, business process management and portal solutions to mid-sized organisations in Australia, supporting over 800 clients nationally. Its multi-product offering is complemented by its development, systems integration, consulting, training, and support services. Professional Advantage is the winner of many business and vendor awards including the Microsoft President's Club 2012 and the 2012 Asia Pacific Partner of the Year Award for Infor.

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