

ASI Group



ASI Goes Hyper with a Virtualised Environment

Albert Smith Industries is the umbrella organisation responsible for more than 20 construction-related companies operating across New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific region. It also owns and oversees the activities of ASI Group, a services organisation established to provide administrative support to all Albert Smith Industries companies. In addition to functions such as payroll and accounting services, one of ASI Group's key responsibilities is the provision of reliable and robust IT services and support.

Problem

For the last 12 years ASI Group has delivered IT services to its sister companies using a centralised model based on Citrix software. For the last two and a half years it has also been operating a virtualised server environment to run core applications such as its SunSystems financial management software.

The decision to adopt virtualisation came about when ASI Group was working with IT partner, Professional Advantage, on a major storage area network (SAN) upgrade. "The project required upgrades to a couple of servers and to get the performance we needed we had to optimise the hardware. Virtualisation offered the answer and VMware was the product of the time so we moved to it," Ross Robinson, ASI Group IT Manager explains.

The result has given ASI the flexibility and scalability it needs to keep up with the construction industry's astronomical growth. Robinson describes the setup, saying, "It's the same principle as cloud computing. It's just that the customers are internal."

Despite this inherent scalability by early 2010 ASI Group's server environment had changed substantially. From a total of eight servers in 2008 the organisation was now managing 20 physical and 44 virtual servers. With the increase in equipment, Robinson and his IT staff had begun to experience a corresponding increase in the effort required to maintain their VMware environment.

Albert Smith Industries

At a glance

Business Objective

To efficiently and cost-effectively deliver cloud computing services to the multiple construction-related companies that form Albert Smith Industries.

Solution

- Microsoft Windows Server 2008 R2
- Microsoft Hyper-V
- Microsoft Exchange Server 2010
- Microsoft Server SQL 2008 R2
- Microsoft Forefront Threat Management Gateway

Business Benefits

- A reliable virtualised IT infrastructure
- Reductions in IT hardware and software licensing costs
- Simplified system management which requires no additional training

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Robinson says, "We were trying to keep the systems up, manage the virtualisation software and manage the server software as well. VMware became just another application that had to be supported so that basically we needed to have another person."

Solution

Unwilling to increase staff numbers Robinson researched ways of simplifying system management. He looked at alternative virtualisation solutions and at alternative software providers. Along the way he tested Microsoft's Hyper-V, conducting comparative performance reviews of Hyper-V and VMware using ASI Group's actual installed applications.

"It was simply a better tool to use. When testing it the only issue we found was a bug in the iSCSI Driver and that was soon resolved. We had no problems after that and decided to move in this direction. We were just about to start implementing Hyper-V when Professional Advantage came along and they recommended it to us as well," Robinson smiles.

Now certain that this was the right way to go, Robinson and his team immediately set about replacing VMware with Hyper-V. "We managed the deployment ourselves with a little help from Professional Advantage. This in itself gave us big savings," he says. Having already learned how to optimise the software during the test period, it took just a little over one hour to install the server and get Hyper-V up and running.

Robinson adds, "We're always happy to use third party support but if we have the capabilities and the time to do it ourselves, we get a better understanding of what we are managing."

Benefits

Robinson believes that by using Hyper-V, ASI Group is saving up to \$30,000 annually due to reduced software licensing costs and the freeing up of staff time. "We've made some really good savings and we don't have the overhead of extra training or extra staff. A Microsoft server technician can easily instigate and run Hyper-V without any additional training," he explains.

Robinson's original aim – simplifying management of the system – has also been achieved. "Microsoft has built an add-on package to allow all server management tools, including all AD management, Hyper-V, Fail Over Clustering, DHCP, DNS and any server management tool found normally on servers, into its Windows 7 desktop so there are no extra interfaces required. Once you install the Windows optimisation it's all there and available from the desktop. It's much easier to manage now," Robinson enthuses.

Future

Over the next year ASI Group will be adding to its servers as it develops a comprehensive disaster recovery capability. It will continue to use virtualisation techniques and Microsoft's Hyper-V to maximise the potential of its hardware, along with ad hoc consulting and technical advice from Professional Advantage.

"There's a lot of growth at ASI and we're always looking at new projects," Robinson concludes.

For more information

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