

Hallmark Business Connections Builds Next-Generation Datacenter using Nutanix Invisible Infrastructure.

Company Background

Hallmark Business Connections is the business-to-business arm of the iconic Hallmark Cards Group, operated as a wholly owned subsidiary organization focused on delivery of reward and incentive programs for employees and customers of Fortune 500 companies. Headquartered in Minneapolis, the company has over 200 staff and delivers its services through a combination of traditional print and digital materials via a Web portal developed, hosted and implemented across three on-premise datacenters.

From Analytical Acorns...

The infrastructure team at Hallmark Business Connections first became interested in hyperconvergence back in 2013 as a possible platform for VDI and investigated it further when budget appeared for a new data analytics project. The original brief was for a scalable, yet affordable, platform to host analytics software which could be deployed rapidly without compromising the company's existing 3-tier compute, storage, and virtualisation infrastructure.

"The main reason for adopting the Nutanix hyperconverged infrastructure was to provide a platform for data analytics," explains Bob Dussault, Director of Infrastructure and Information Security Officer at Hallmark Business Connections, "However, I also saw it as the perfect opportunity to demonstrate to senior management what hyperconvergence was all about and the potential benefits of using it in the long term to completely replace our traditional 3-tier datacenter platforms."

...to Next Generation Oaks

Having received the green light to take the analytics on the software-defined hyperconvergence project forward, Dussault and his team started talking with a number of vendors, eventually choosing Nutanix as the preferred solution.

"We chose Nutanix, not just for the excellence of its product, but for the maturity of the company and operational excellence in terms of support, logistics, and general professionalism," explains Dussault. "It gave me the confidence to pitch the technology to senior management, secure in the knowledge that it was a lot more than a passing trend."

Following impressive proof of concept trials with faster than expected performance and subsequent successful implementation of the business analytics project, Hallmark decided to go even further and build out their next generation datacenter based on Nutanix. And the rest, as they say, is history.

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– Bob Dussault, Director of Infrastructure and Information Security Officer,
Hallmark Business Connections



Industry

Technology / Business to Business.

Business Needs

- Immediate – deployment of new data analytics application.
- Three-year roadmap – migration of entire datacenter to hyperconverged infrastructure.

Technical Needs

- Scalable platform for data analytics application.
- Poor build performance.
- Migrate development and production workloads from 3-tier infrastructure to a hyper converged next-generation datacenter.

Solution

Nutanix XCP NX-6000/NX-8000 Series
VMware vSphere

Benefits

- 72% reduction in software build time.
- 55% reduction in costs to operate the infrastructure.
- Support workload reduced by a factor of ten – from 20 to just 2 hours/week.
- More efficient and mobile way of working.
- Enabled transition to multi-hypervisor environment with lower costs.
- Enabled development of a private cloud platform for future scale.



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Feeling the Benefits

With work well under way towards deployment of both a new production cluster and backup disaster recovery (DR) system, Hallmark Business Connections is already seeing benefits, including unprecedented returns in terms of both performance and productivity. Hallmark Business Connections, for example, relies heavily on in-house application development to support its business and one of the most startling results of the switch to hyperconvergence has been the impact on the development lifecycle.

"We take a DevOps approach, and for agility, we favor continuous integration builds," explains Dussault. "However, it was taking as many as two hours to complete each of those new builds. Moving that workload to the Nutanix cluster has enabled us to reduce the time needed up to 72%, to easily meet our target of delivering up to twelve builds per day."

Dussault was impressed with how easy the Nutanix platform was to integrate with the existing infrastructure, characterizing the learning curve as "slight", and a major plus when migrating from old to new. He also mentioned the productivity gains they have obtained from eliminating the need for storage management. This alone is reducing engineer workloads hugely, from an estimated 20 hours a week to just two. Plus, there are benefits to be had as a result of a much reduced hardware footprint.

"Hyperconvergence will allow us to scale our development and production footprint down from eleven to just five equipment racks over the next couple of years, equating to a 55% reduction

in what it costs to operate the infrastructure," explains Dussault. "This was not our main reason for choosing Nutanix, but a welcome bonus and a major consideration when it comes to future expansion."

And lastly, the hypervisor agnostic nature of the Nutanix approach was a major selling point. "We were already looking for a path to move away from VMware as a cost-saving measure," claims Dussault. "Nutanix has helped us to understand that we can do this quickly. We are particularly excited by the Acropolis and Prism product portfolio, which will further help us achieve that aim."

Future Plans

Now in the second year of a three year roadmap, Hallmark is on track to completing its next-generation datacenter by the end of 2016, with Dussault confident that all customer-facing workloads will have been moved to the Nutanix platform in the next few months. He is confident too that the offsite disaster recovery cluster, based in a separate facility in Chicago, will be up and running later this year. Database workloads are also being migrated and the company has plans to finalize the migration away from its traditional 3-tier infrastructure by implementing an additional Nutanix cluster to host back office and productivity workloads.

Hallmark Business Connections is also planning to migrate to the Acropolis hypervisor, now an integral component of the Nutanix platform. In addition to reduced licensing costs, they are expecting to see a significant reduction in management overhead as a result.



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