

Brit Insurance boosts flexibility with IBM XIV

Overview

The need

With 50 percent annual growth in its Microsoft® SQL Server environment, Brit Insurance was running out of room on its existing storage platforms, but lacked space in its data center to add capacity.

The solution

Brit Insurance deployed an IBM XIV Storage System replicated to a second XIV® system in its DR center. From a base configuration, the company tripled the capacity on both to 79 TB within six months.

The benefit

The IBM XIV solution provides scalable, easy-to-manage storage for a fast-growing database environment. Ultra-rapid provisioning enables greater flexibility and creativity in building new test/dev virtual servers.

Brit Insurance is an international general insurance and reinsurance group specializing in commercial insurance. First listed on the FTSE 250 in 2002, Brit Insurance has grown rapidly—both organically and through acquisition—and today employs around 850 people.

To support the generation of insurance quotations, Brit Insurance pulls in databases from brokers, which its underwriters use when running their pricing models. These Microsoft SQL server databases are then archived, ready to be remounted and pulled into local caches for analysis when the relevant insurance policies are due for renewal. As the data sets have become richer and the pricing models have increased in complexity, the SQL Server environment has grown in size. Combined with Brit Insurance's rapid business growth, this is driving 50 percent year-on-year growth in the SQL Server environment.

Steve Pitcher, Infrastructure Manager, Brit Insurance, comments: "Our midtier storage solution had around 25 TB of capacity with limited scalability options, and that was no longer sufficient for our needs. We wanted a new midtier solution that would offer high capacity, easy management and scalability of performance if needed at a later date. IBM XIV fit the bill—for us, its greatest value is simplicity."

Surprising capabilities

Brit Insurance initially considered a range of potential solutions from what it considered to be the traditional vendors, narrowing down to a shortlist of three. At that point, IBM proposed its XIV storage solution: An innovative grid-architecture storage system offering enterprise levels of performance and availability at midmarket pricing, and with a stunningly simple management environment.



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“We weren’t reluctant to consider the IBM option—just a little skeptical,” recalls Pitcher. “When IBM explained the XIV technology and we understood what it was trying to do, it was intriguing: We were pleasantly surprised! Our RFP looked primarily at ease of management and simplified cost modeling. The decision for IBM came down to cost, ease of management, and the potential performance capability of the solution for future initiatives. The XIV system is the right fit for how we manage storage.”

At first, Brit Insurance relied on the VMware migration facility to move data from their traditional storage system to the IBM XIV system, rather than the built-in migration feature of the IBM XIV. “We used the XIV data migration feature at a later stage—and it proved very powerful and easy to use,” says Pitcher.

Supporting creativity

The storage team at Brit Insurance works closely with the internal server and software development teams. These teams frequently request new virtual storage volumes for test/development projects. For example, a team might request a 200 GB LUN for virtual desktop testing. The previous solution lacked the performance to support such an environment, forcing the storage team to set it up on the top-tier storage solution. This required considerably more planning, and such requests would typically be executed within four or five days. By contrast, provisioning a new LUN on the XIV solution is simple and requires no planning, so the team can create and deliver storage in ten minutes flat.

“With the IBM XIV storage system, we are facilitating project-based requests much sooner,” says Pitcher. “Back when it took four or five days, that was a genuine barrier to creativity and productivity. Now, when someone on a development team has an idea they want to try out, we can deliver the necessary space within minutes and they can get on with it. So XIV provides the opportunity for creativity to flourish among those teams.”

IBM Solution Components

Hardware

- IBM® XIV® Storage System
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IT Environment

Operating systems

- Microsoft® Windows® Server 2003 and 2008
- Sun Solaris 10

Databases

- Microsoft SQL Server 2005 and 2008
- Oracle 11g

Applications

- Quest Software LiteSpeed for SQL Server (backup software)

Virtualization

- VMware ESX Server 3.5 and 4.0
-

Performance saves time

The XIV storage system delivered a welcome performance boost in backups for Brit Insurance’s large VMware virtual server landscape.

Says Pitcher, “The XIV solution has given us a significant improvement in backing up our VMware-based test/development environment. In the past, I/O bottlenecks were causing a high backup failure rate of around 30 percent. With the XIV solution, that has fallen to just two or three percent, and those failures are unrelated to storage I/O. The greatest impact of problematic backups is the administrative time and effort taken to resolve them. Before, we might have a skilled person spending the greater part of their working day on that, and increasing the overhead on the servers by re-running the backups. The XIV solution reduces the demands on our IT team.”

The right choice—IBM XIV storage system

Today, Brit Insurance is steadily moving more and more of its data onto the XIV storage system—the XIV is connected to more than 300 virtual servers, of which 20 are low-criticality production environments and 29 are business-critical risk and financial modeling systems. From the base configuration of 27 TB, Brit Insurance had expanded both its XIV systems to the full 79 TB within six months.

“The built-in thin-provisioning functionality on the XIV system is very useful,” says Steve Pitcher. “We have created separate pools of storage—both thin and fat—on the XIV storage system. The test/development and archive environments are thin provisioned. The XIV user interface makes it easy to see when pools are near their limits, and we can resize them very easily. There’s an overhead in the internal mirroring of data, but that’s somewhat offset by the thin provisioning. Overall, we’re saving capacity in our SQL Server environment.”

He concludes: “Beyond space efficiency and ease of management, the big benefit is the flexibility that the XIV solution gives us. We were previously often seen as the bottleneck for IT projects, because our old technology didn’t allow us to provision space fast enough. Now, that pressure has been eased, and the XIV has given our team a better reputation internally.”

For more information

Contact your IBM sales representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit us at: ibm.com/storage/disk/xiv/

For more information about Brit Insurance visit: britinsurance.com

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