

ALLOS PLAYS THE VIRTUAL HOST

HRD consultancy delivers customer solutions up to six times faster with clustered virtual infrastructure



For IT solution providers, every element of customer service depends on access to the latest technology. To inspire customer confidence, it's essential that these companies have robust, flexible IT infrastructures that allow them to create reliable, cutting-edge solutions.

SOLUTIONS:

- BACKUP, RECOVERY AND ARCHIVING
- HIGH PERFORMANCE CLUSTERING
- MANAGEMENT
- SERVER CONSOLIDATION
- VIRTUALIZATION



CUSTOMER PROFILE

COMPANY: Allos
INDUSTRY: IT
COUNTRY: South Africa
FOUNDED: 1982
EMPLOYEES: 140
WEBSITE: www.allos.co.za

CHALLENGE

E-learning provider Allos wanted to simplify customer experience by offering hosted solutions. To pursue this, the company needed a new datacentre that would support multiple solutions, with state-of-the-art security and easy expansion.

SOLUTION

Dell designed a high-performance clustered server infrastructure running VMware® Infrastructure software. This gives Allos a highly available, flexible foundation for growth. A Dell/EMC storage solution centralises storage, while a Dell tape library guarantees backup.

BENEFITS

Get IT Faster

- New customer solutions rolled-out up to six times faster
- New virtual servers deployed in hours, not weeks

Run IT Better

- Quality assurance cuts costs by approximately 50 per cent
- Servers provide approximately 98 per cent uptime

Grow IT Smarter

- Scalable system supports long-term strategies
- With virtualized infrastructure, system can be easily expanded



At Allos, progress is all about combining technical expertise with innovation. With the datacenter based in Milan, Italy, the company helps enterprises develop integrated e-learning solutions for staff, customer and partner training. The South African division, Allos Consulting, focuses on commercial e-learning systems for companies with 5,000 to 100,000 employees.

Simone Zanetti, chief executive officer, Allos Consulting, says: "We've established a strong reputation, both as a solutions provider and a consultancy. But, in our industry, nothing stays the same for long – to maintain our success we have to make sure we're at the forefront of technology. We're always monitoring industry trends to see how we can add value to our solutions and improve customer experience."

Zanetti saw that companies using learning, knowledge and talent management solutions often experienced unforeseen costs and delays related to training and maintenance. "We asked ourselves how we could help our customers assess costs more accurately and simplify the process of installing and owning a learning management system."

The answer lay in hosted solutions – solutions managed by the provider rather than installed behind the customer firewall. Zanetti explains:

"The trend towards technology outsourcing continues to grow because it gives companies the opportunity to adopt new technologies quickly with minimal costs. If an enterprise needs to train 5,000 new employees in five weeks, a system that takes months to install and requires a team of specialised staff to manage it isn't ideal. A hosted solution is easier to roll-out because it can be easily integrated with the customer's existing infrastructure, and there's no strain on internal resources."

Confident that this approach would create a new, profitable line of business, Zanetti and his colleagues decided to run a proof-of-concept (POC). This took place at the Milan office, where Allos had its sole datacentre. The existing datacentre consisted of a mix of technology, from Dell and two other solution providers. The POC was a success, but due to South African bandwidth restrictions Allos could not deliver the hosted solutions into that country. So, the company decided to create a new datacentre in Johannesburg.

The key requirements for the new datacentre were:

- **Scalability:** Rapid addition of 8 virtual new servers and storage to accommodate new users for existing solutions and new customers



"WITH DELL TECHNOLOGY, WE ARE DELIVERING PROJECTS FASTER AND MORE COST-EFFECTIVELY, AND INCREASING OUR COMPETITIVE EDGE."

Simone Zanetti, chief executive officer, Allos Consulting

HOW IT WORKS

HARDWARE

- Dell™ PowerEdge™ 2950 and 6850 servers
- Dell | EMC CX3-10c storage area network (SAN)
- Dell PowerVault™ TL2000 LT024 tape library
- Foundry Load balancers

SOFTWARE

- VMware® Infrastructure software
- Dell OpenManage™ Systems management
- Symantec BackUp Exec™

SERVICES

- Dell Global Infrastructure Consulting Services (GICS)
 - Assessment, design and implementation
 - Virtualization
 - Migration
 - HPC
 - Database
- Dell ProSupport for IT*

- **Smplicity:** Easy management of multiple hosted solutions on a single platform
- **Cost-effectiveness:** High performance and expansion without spiraling hardware and energy costs
- **Security:** Expert backup and disaster recovery strategies to keep customer data safe

Zanetti sought advice from Dell and one other incumbent provider. "We were encouraged by previous experiences with Dell Global Infrastructure Consulting Services (GICS) in Europe," he says. "When we discussed the new datacentre, Dell's consultants understood our objectives and designed a cost-effective solution to support our new line of business."

They suggested a highly available, virtualized infrastructure based on clustered Dell™ PowerEdge™ servers running VMware® server software. Zanetti and his colleagues decided to install the solution at Verizon – a Dell global partner widely recognized as a leader in IT hosting.

The initial configuration of the system consists of:

- Four Dell PowerEdge 2950 servers to run applications, recommended as a strong foundation for virtualization. They are configured in pairs, with one pair providing backup for the other. Two run VMware
- One Dell PowerEdge 2950 server for on-site backup of VMs
- One virtualized PowerEdge 2950 test server, providing Allos with a risk-free, offline environment for quality assurance work
- Two PowerEdge 6850 servers, chosen for their high capacity, to run Oracle database. These are mirrored, providing redundancy in the event of a failure
- One PowerEdge 6850 server, located at Allos' office, which replicates all data for disaster recovery.

Zanetti and his team have deployed eight virtual machines so far and plan to double this number in the near future.

“WITH DELL SERVERS AND VMWARE SOFTWARE, WE HAVE A SYSTEM THAT WE CAN ADD TO INCREMENTALLY EACH TIME WE WIN A NEW CUSTOMER.”

Simone Zanetti, chief executive officer, Allos Consulting



With Virtualization, addition of extra environments is both easier and faster. A Dell/EMC CX3-10c fibre storage area network (SAN) provides high performance centralised storage, while a Dell PowerVault™ TL2000 LT024 tape library stores all virtual and physical data for secondary backup.

Dell GICS worked closely with a project management team from Verizon to install the solution. They also organised bandwidth and cabling to ensure continuous data replication between the database server at Verizon and the PowerEdge 6850 server at Allos. Zanetti and his team installed the Oracle database.

The company opted for Dell ProSupport with a guaranteed four hour SLA for onsite repairs and round-the-clock telephone support.

VIRTUAL INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORTS NEW REVENUE STREAM

Allos is now hosting a knowledge management system for some large enterprises. Zanetti says: “Feedback from our first customers has been excellent. In fact, they’re increasing their users. Several of our existing customers plan to move to the hosted environment, and we have several potential leads for new customers. The Dell Infrastructure Consulting Services is at the heart of our new business model.”

As the foundation of Allos’ new hosted solution service, the infrastructure has given the company an opportunity to develop more profitable customer relationships. “With Dell servers and storage, we have a foundation that’s flexible and secure. We know that we can meet our customers’ needs by hosting

their solution on Dell technology. So, we can focus on their business objectives, rather than worrying about technical details. We concentrate on end-results, rather than the technicalities of how to install a new system.”

NEW SOLUTIONS DELIVERED UP TO SIX TIMES FASTER

At Allos, a simple solution runs on three servers. More complex applications require eight to 10 servers. This means that rapid, cost-effective addition of new servers is essential if the company is to expand its customer base.

With the new system, the company can deliver solutions in four to eight weeks. Using the non-hosted, non-virtualized systems, average roll-out time for a new solution can be four to six months.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, with hosted solutions, design and installation is simpler because there is no need to integrate new hardware into the customer’s existing infrastructure. Second, travel time is reduced. And lastly, the virtualized infrastructure means that the IT team can deploy new virtual servers in hours – either to support new solutions or expand existing ones.

Zanetti says: “Our customers are often surprised by how quickly we respond to their requests. If a company wants to add 10,000 users for a different division of the company, with a virtualized environment we don’t have to order a new server, wait for it to arrive and then configure it. We can create a new virtual server in a couple of hours. Generally, we can implement major changes in less than a week.”

In addition, now that the company no longer installs solutions at customers’ offices, there are fewer technical issues to resolve during

rollout. “We can design and deploy our solutions much faster now that we can run them on our own systems and deliver them over the Internet. But that means we have to have total confidence in the technology we use – with Dell, we do.”

FLEXIBLE, EASY-TO-MANAGE PLATFORM SIMPLIFIES MAINTENANCE

The server architecture also allows the company to host customised solutions for each customer on a common platform, keeping all clients completely separated at the same time. Zanetti and his team simply build new virtual servers with different configurations for each solution. This combination of standardisation and flexibility means that the company has an easy-to-manage system tailored to customers’ varying requirements.

“Dell designed our new architecture to make management very simple, so the time we spend on routine tasks is minimal. Ultimately, we’ll be running multiple solutions, each with thousands of users, so it’s crucial that our servers and storage are easy to run. Once we start using Dell OpenManage™ Systems Management, it will allow us to view the entire infrastructure through a single console, and receive automatic notifications of potential issues,” Zanetti says.

SECURE PLATFORM KEEPS CUSTOMER DATA SAFE

For any customer considering a hosted solution, security is paramount. Dell met this requirement by designing a redundant infrastructure.

“NOW THAT WE CAN USE VIRTUAL SERVERS, RATHER THAN PHYSICAL, WE’VE CUT HARDWARE COSTS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE BY APPROXIMATELY 50 PER CENT.”

Simone Zanetti, chief executive officer, Allos Consulting

The database servers operate in active-passive mode – so if one fails, the other instantly takes over and business critical data remains available. Meanwhile, the remote database server gives Zanetti the peace of mind that he can retrieve customer data in the event of a disaster such as a fire.

“With the Dell solution, we can assure our customers that their information is safe,” Zanetti says. “We have also installed Symantec BackUp Exec, which allows us to schedule automated backups to the SAN and the tape library. This will simplify maintenance by reducing manual input and remove the risk of human error. The system will take care of itself. A disaster recovery strategy is also in place.”

In addition, if a virtual server fails, the team simply uses VMware Virtual Center to move applications to another virtual server while they carry out zero-downtime repairs. This allows the team to maintain the system without any disruption to customers.

COST-EFFECTIVE SERVER EXPANSION SUPPORTS TWO YEAR GROWTH PLAN

Slow, costly acquisition of physical servers would not only delay delivery of services, but reduce profitability through hardware costs, energy costs and time spent on admin and server deployment. But, with a virtualized infrastructure, Zanetti and his team can expand the system without buying, configuring and powering physical servers.

“With Dell servers and VMware software, we have a system that we can add to incrementally each time we win a new customer,” Zanetti says. “It’s a highly scalable system that supports our long-term strategies for developing the business. By adding virtual servers and extra disk space to the SAN, we’ll have enough capacity for two years’ growth, with very minimal costs.”

What’s more, the company has minimised the space required for physical hardware, and reduced power and cooling costs. “We don’t have to worry about spiralling energy costs as our server infrastructure grows, and we don’t have to worry about running out of space in our datacentre,” says Zanetti.

Meanwhile, the virtual testing environment has dramatically reduced costs. “Now that we use virtual, rather than physical servers, we’ve cut hardware costs for quality assurance by approximately 50 per cent,” Zanetti explains. “With Dell technology, we are delivering projects faster and more cost-effectively, and increasing our competitive edge,” says Zanetti.

For more information on this case study or to read additional case studies, go to www.dell.com/casestudies and www.dell.co.za

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