Success Story

Autonet Insurance Speeds Performance and Improves Business Operations with NetApp All-Flash Array

Another NetApp
solution delivered by:

LIMA

Customer Profile

Autonet Insurance is a privately owned company, first established in 1998 in Stoke-on-Trent. The company's founding was the opening chapter in what has become a very successful insurance story. After just two years, the company hit a turnover of £1 million. Since then, it has grown to become the United Kingdom's largest independent van insurance broker with a turnover in excess of £130 million.

Autonet Insurance handles more than 1.2 million calls a year, maintaining excellent relationships with over 30 of the leading and most trusted insurance providers. The insurance industry is constantly evolving, so Autonet strives to stay ahead of the latest developments and the way that consumers shop for insurance.

The company has also won many awards. In 2014, it became the first insurance broker to win both the Personal Lines Broker of the Year award and the Independent Broker of the Year award at the Insurance Times Awards.

The Challenge

Over the past two to three years, Autonet has experienced significant data and systems growth, driven largely by its continued endeavours to grow its market share. As a result, the company needed more storage space. For several years, Autonet had been using storage based on NetApp FAS2040.

Nik Potts, head of IT at Autonet Insurance, said, "We knew NetApp was reliable and easy to manage, but our needs had essentially outgrown FAS2040 and we needed something that would not only provide more capacity, but also allow us to plan for the future and easily accommodate future growth needs."

Following consultation with its IT partner, LIMA, Autonet upgraded to NetApp FAS3220. The new system includes one shelf of twenty-four 600GB SAS drives and two shelves of twenty-four 2TB SATA drives, and it also features a NetApp Flash Cache™ performance acceleration module.

NetApp FAS3220 has certainly delivered. It has a midrange data storage platform that enables flash and clustering, and it also improved IT performance and agility. A high-performance processor and memory architecture support flash and enterprise clustering, enabling

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an agile infrastructure that adapts to support any combination of application workloads, without introducing complexity.

FAS3220 has delivered a raft of benefits, from cost-effectiveness and high performance to the ability to add new business services within 30 minutes. Nik Potts explains: "It helps deliver a highly available infrastructure, which, in business terms, means we can be really dynamic in the provisioning of services. People from the business are really surprised when they make a request and I tell them, 'It will be with you in 30 minutes,' but that's what we can do."

This ability to meet new business needs on demand has been strengthened by point-and-click management, making it easy to allocate resources and increase value for the money with immediate resiliency, reliability, and redundancy. These features are delivered out of the box, and along with scalability and high performance, they easily support the business.

Along with these requirements, Autonet needed to ramp up performance for its virtualisation environment. However, for a short time, the company experienced performance issues with Microsoft SQL Server in its virtualisation environment. The company had more than enough processing capacity but was experiencing

bottlenecks on disk input/output (I/O). These bottlenecks were slowing down Autonet's SQL Servers, which in turn was affecting the business.

Nik Potts says, "Eighty percent of our servers are in a virtual environment, but the disk I/O SQL Server bottleneck was choking the system. SQL Servers were using 70 percent of IOPS, so we wanted to ring-fence I/O and create granular controls so we could manage this. This required more flash-based performance."

The Solution
Because Autonet has had such a positive experience with NetApp technology, it naturally looked at flash-based storage from NetApp. After scanning the market for alternative technologies, Autonet eventually concluded that NetApp could meet all of the company's requirements without bolting on additional hardware.

After sitting down with LIMA Networks again, Autonet chose NetApp AFF8060 with two shelves of twenty-four 800GB solid-state drives (SSDs). NetApp all-flash AFF8060 was designed for performance-demanding applications such as databases, virtual desktop infrastructures, and server virtualisation. Specifically for a virtualisation environment, AFF8060 provides unified SAN

and NAS support and application ecosystem integration.

The system also offers a range of features and capabilities, such as NetApp Snapshot® copies, cloning, encryption, and both synchronous and asynchronous replication for backup and disaster recovery.

Autonet also uses the NetApp clustered Data ONTAP 8.3.1 operating system to manage the NetApp FAS3220 platform. The FAS3220 replicates data to the remote disaster recovery and backup environment, which consists of NetApp FAS2552. The FAS2552 system has three shelves of twenty-four 600GB SAS drives and two shelves of 2TB SATA drives, which also run Data ONTAP 8.3.1.

Business Benefits
High-speed performance
The implementation of NetApp AFF8060 immediately solved Autonet's bottleneck problems with a 10-fold increase in performance, from 10,000 I/O operations per second (IOPS) to 100,000 IOPS. "It was a no-brainer," says Nik Potts. "It has resulted in a huge performance gain, and the increased performance capacity has not only smoothed out the bottlenecks but led to real business benefits, too."

Faster website and business uptick
It's a well-established fact that webpages that load slowly can lead to customers' abandoning

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websites. This loss of users can, in turn, equate to a loss of business. With the improved performance from NetApp systems, Autonet webpages load in less than 3 seconds instead of the 15 seconds that it took previously. Thanks to improved website responses, Autonet has seen a three-point improvement in online purchases. "It's generally difficult to attribute specific business uplifts to a storage platform, but in this case, we can say that thanks to the NetApp all-flash platform, we have seen an increase in online sales," adds Nik Potts.

Call centre gains
Apps that were used in the Autonet call centre were being affected by the SQL Server performance. For instance, the customer relationship management (CRM) platform was slow and sometimes unresponsive because of the disk I/O bottleneck. At the same time, the slow online buying process caused customers to phone the call centre to try to make purchases. However, both these issues have now been resolved. As Nik Potts explains, "Call centre agents have seen an

improvement in everything they do, including using the CRM application. At the same time, we have fewer customers phoning the call centre because of website issues."

No downtime
The NetApp clustered Data ONTAP 8.3.1 operating system has essentially eliminated downtime for Autonet's storage platform. Autonet uses clustered Data ONTAP to power its enterprise applications, deliver high IOPS at submillisecond latency levels, and leverage the flash features of its platform, among other uses. Nik Potts says, "We can maintain data storage and upgrade software without interrupting the business. It's a nondisruptive platform, and we should never have storage downtime again."

Value for the money
NetApp has consistently proved to deliver value for the money. For instance, NetApp FAS3220, which was implemented ahead of the all-flash array, is "simply the best deal in terms of value for money," says Nik Potts. The all-flash AFF8060 platform and clustered Data ONTAP 8.3.1 operating system also deliver

similar value in terms of cost-effectiveness and reliability. As Nik Potts summarises, "There hasn't been a time when we haven't had absolute trust in NetApp, because it delivers again and again. We've solved our disk I/O problem, improved the customer experience, and are helping refresh operations within different business groups."

SOLUTION COMPONENTS

- NetApp AFF8060 with two shelves of twenty-four 800GB SSDs
- Clustered Data ONTAP 8.3.1
- Clustered Data ONTAP 8.3.1 also used to manage the NetApp FAS3220 platform, which replicates to the NetApp FAS2552 remote disaster recovery and backup environment

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