RHWL Architects

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> Dave Allerton, IT Director, RHWL

Overview

Industry
Architectural Services

Challenges
· Eliminate disruptions resulting from emergency file archiving
· Reduce storage and storage management costs
· Speed up weekly file backups

Solution
· F5 ARX500

Benefits
· More than 5000 man-hours of user productivity gained per year
· Optimized use of existing storage capacity, eliminating the need to purchase additional tier 1 storage
· Backup time reduced from 14 hours to 1.5 hours
· Reduced tape and offsite storage costs

RHWL Gains 5000+ Hours of User Productivity with Automated Storage Tiering from F5

RHWL is a multi-skilled architectural practice, renowned for designing a broad range of buildings from sports stadiums and theatres to residential developments and commercial premises. It has approximately 130 employees based at offices in the UK and Germany. Its architects create large, technical documents embedded with images and diagrams. These huge files can place a considerable strain on servers and rapidly consume available storage capacity.

The company found itself struggling to meet the need for additional capacity while attempting to manage its storage budget. Users were often disrupted as IT shuffled files and archived files offline to salvage enough storage capacity to operate. By implementing F5 ARX to manage its file storage more effectively, RHWL achieved time, productivity, and cost savings, with an expected time to ROI of less than one year.

Business Challenges

RHWL's IT infrastructure consists of multiple servers running Microsoft Windows applications and a range of specialist computer-aided design (CAD) and image manipulation packages. In addition, the company has a storage area network (SAN), which holds the majority of its file storage. A high-speed wide area network (WAN) provides a vital connection between the London and Berlin offices.

As the company grew and started to work on more and more projects, it began to face a series of challenges in its UK office. "We were continually running out of storage space on our SAN solution," says Dave Allerton, IT Director at RHWL. "As a result, we had to do emergency archives of data that, ideally, we would have preferred to have kept online."

Soon, these "emergencies" became an almost weekly event. "They started to take up a lot of time in the IT department and also inconvenienced employees," explains Allerton. "Taking files offline required

interacting with the architects to ask them which folders we could offload. Then, just as we finished offloading and freeing capacity, we would invariably need to refer to plans and documents that had just been archived, and then the IT team would have to reverse the process. This cost the business a lot of money in terms of wasted IT time, wasted architects' time, and possible delays in design projects."

Additionally, every Friday, RHWL performs a complete backup of all of its files, with smaller incremental backups occurring during the week. "This process was causing problems for us as well," says Allerton. "The weekly backup was taking so many tapes and taking so much time that we were struggling to accomplish it during the course of a weekend."

Solution

RHWL realised that it needed a better longer-term storage solution. "The obvious choice would have been to expand the capacity of our SAN," explains Allerton. "But this required spending another several hundred thousand pounds on new storage, which we just did not have in the budget." The company decided to consider other alternatives and Allerton began researching automated tiered storage solutions.

"My main criterion was that the new solution had to make financial sense," says Allerton. "We didn't just want to add more space; we wanted to reduce the cost of storage per gigabyte and gain a solution that would be much more scalable to support our future growth."

After reviewing the solutions offered by a number of IT vendors, RHWL selected F5's ARX500. This intelligent file virtualization solution provides an easy way for organisations to access, move, and manage data across multiple servers. "F5 came out

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more cost effective by far," notes Allerton. "F5 also had experience in delivering solutions to other architect firms and businesses facing similar challenges to RHWL."

ARX enables companies to define their own policies for managing stored data across servers, generally based on age, type, and frequency of access characteristics. RHWL can adjust its data archive to suit its business needs and make changes to it, on the fly if necessary. Allerton explains, "I carried out an analysis of our files and found that many of them hadn't been touched in more than six months. We were able to set up the F5 ARX to migrate different files to different platforms, according to how recently they had been modified."

He continues, "Initially we set up the solution to archive files that hadn't been modified within 12 months, but we can increase or decrease this time period whenever we want to. We can also elect to migrate documents based on file type. The solution gives us all sorts of flexibility."

Benefits

RHWL worked closely with F5 and one of F5's partners, TecTrade Computers Limited, to implement the ARX solution. The project went very smoothly. "I don't think that employees within the firm were even aware that any changes had been made," says Allerton. "That was a real win from my

point of view. The individuals from F5 that we worked with were very flexible and knowledgeable."

With its new solution in place, RHWL no longer has to perform lengthy and costly backups at the end of each week. "Our weekend backup times have dropped from 14 hours to just one and one half hours," reports Allerton. "This creates a saving in time as well as in the cost of tapes."

As part of the total solution, RHWL purchased one new lower-cost storage array for tier 2 storage. However, most of the additional capacity the company has acquired has come from making better use of its existing server capacity. The ARX solution maximises utilization and organises files, so that RHWL doesn't have to constantly migrate files to archives. "There's no more crisis management of storage space," says Allerton. "Users don't run out of disk space anymore."

While the F5 solution has made a big difference in the IT department, it is business as usual for the architectural teams. "The solution is very transparent from a user point of view," adds Allerton. "Users still see their files where they are accustomed to seeing them, regardless of their physical location on our network. Performance at the user level is as good as or better than before, and we are no longer interrupting their work to archive files."

RHWL estimates that its use of ARX will increase employee productivity by more than 5,000 man-hours per year, while also enabling the business to put off purchasing costly tier 1 storage in favour of cheaper options. "The total cost of the ARX alternative was miniscule compared to the likely cost of expanding our SAN," Allerton says. "We expect to achieve a rapid return on our investment and are confident that we made the right decision in selecting F5."