Westfund transitions to cloud-based solutions and sees benefits

■ NetApp

westfund
Health Insurance

An Australian health insurer with a rich history moves toward a limitless data future enabled by a NetApp hybrid cloud.

Westfund Health Insurance helped to forge the private health industry in Australia back in 1953 – with origins dating back to 1881. Westfund has evolved a lot since then but one thing that's remained the same is their care for all Australians. Westfund Health Insurance, as the fund is known today, is proud to provide cover for over 110,000 individuals across the country.

To make sure that their data demands are carefully managed, Westfund launched an upgrade and migration project, with the goal of moving workloads to the cloud. With this step, Westfund has achieved performance improvements and cost savings. NetApp® A-Series arrays and NetApp ONTAP® data management software support hybrid data centres that are faster, easier to manage, and deliver new opportunities for innovation.

Opportunities for cloud in the future

"We're now at the point where our infrastructure and our bandwidth are ready for us to pursue a truly cloud first approach."

Daniel McLoughlan
Technical Services Manager, Westfund

Way out west

Westfund is a health insurer with a long, proud history operating in a market that is closely regulated. Westfund is highly data dependent in their interactions with members, medical care providers, and other insurance systems. As with every industry today, the company's data demands are growing exponentially, requiring regular refreshes of the underlying storage infrastructure.

Westfund's head office and its existing data centre are located in Lithgow, a regional town west of Sydney. Although the site is not remote, until very recently Westfund had issues with telco bandwidth that prohibited the health insurer from taking advantage of the cloud. Westfund has a number of home-grown and off-the-shelf applications, all running on SQL databases in a VMware environment. They have two primary databases for core systems and a total of 25 production databases, totaling approximately 9TB in volume.

The application environment includes an internal claims processing application as well as member-facing applications used at point-of-service locations; for example, in eyewear clinics.

Expanding services, improving data access

Due to regulations and other factors, there is a parity in insurance offerings, so differentiation in the market focuses on service delivery. Westfund needed a storage infrastructure that could support not just the minimum requirements but would support new requests and initiatives.

For Daniel McLoughlan, technology services manager at Westfund, the need to upgrade is an opportunity.

"The more digitized we become, the faster that grows our electronic documents, photographic evidence, receipts, and such," Mr. McLoughlan said. "That's growth we want because it provides better service."

The existing onsite data centre, built on a NetApp® E-series storage array, was experiencing performance and capacity issues due to growth. Development of new services slowed to a crawl. The length of time required to perform backups and update databases ballooned. The SQL databases slowed, which slowed the applications.

"If SQL is running slowly, everyone notices, particularly the front-line staff trying to assist members with a queue behind them," Mr. McLoughlan said. "Same with online services. That also directly translates into well-performing websites, well-performing online services, and well-performing mobile apps. And we only hear about it if it's not working well."

After strategic planning and a tender process with NetApp's trusted IT service provider Canary IT, NetApp and the NetApp AFF A-Series storage arrays won the day. The tight integration of NetApp ONTAP® data management software and VMware made sticking with both for the upgrade an easy decision.

In the last couple of years, the national telcos had made significant investments that would solve bandwidth issues, making the decision to move to a cloud-enabled data centre and future off-site storage an easy decision. Westfund could achieve performance gains and take advantage of cloud at the same time.

| **From 28 seconds to** **1 second** **in application wait time** | **4x** **improvement in storage performance** | **$100K** **annual savings in wages from reduced wait times** |

Drastic improvement in performance

When the upgrade was made, it went off without a hitch and the impact was immediate. Mr. McLoughlan and his team documented a 4x improvement in storage performance, resulting in lightning-fast application performance. So noticeable was the improvement that some users reported something "wrong."

"It solved for us the need for speed and storage space," Mr. McLoughlan said. "But that directly translates to good service, efficient service and responsiveness."

The service impact was felt directly by Westfund staff and the members they serve. Claim application wait times were reduced from 28 seconds to one second almost overnight..

The employee productivity gains – simply being able to help members faster and thus help more members – equal an annual savings of $100k AUS. Performance improvement is having an impact on the IT development teams as well giving them the speed needed to develop, test and deploy much faster than before. Projects that would have created a drag on the production performance can now be executed with confidence.

"From a development cycle perspective, it's back to almost instantaneous," Mr. McLoughlan said. "The strategic plan has been accelerated significantly. The advantage is that we were able to move forward on a lot of the offerings."

Disasters avoided, costs saved

In addition to improved performance, application availability has been enhanced through the integration of NetApp ONTAP with VMware Site Recovery Manager. Now Westfund can use offsite disaster recovery (DR) in an on-premises or a hybrid-cloud future—the processes and tooling are the same. One-button recoverability and DR testing capabilities enhance the value of the VMware environment and the NetApp storage infrastructure.

Integration also means a smaller administration footprint. Fewer people are required to manage the infrastructure, allowing them to focus on higher-value projects.

"The integration from NetApp around the VMware backup and its ability to use SnapMirror to DR make a huge difference to keeping that management under control and staying on top of updates and their demands around support of the environment," Mr. McLoughlan said.

Responsive delivery of new services

The upgrade and an eventual migration of the data centre from onsite Lithgow to offsite Sydney and to multicloud platforms will also go a long way toward improving the availability and security of corporate systems. Use of the cloud for disaster recovery will help reduce costs, minimize the need for additional IT staff, and make sure that the health insurer can meet all governance, risk, and compliance guidelines.

Their investment is also going to help Westfund with more predicable costs and additional opportunities for predictable savings, such as reducing the need for IT staff to manage different platforms. NetApp ONTAP for storage management in a hybrid environment does it all—on premises, in the cloud, production, development, DR—from a single view.

Cloud-future cloud

Westfund is in an enviable position, because the company is just now beginning its cloud journey. A few of the company's applications and sites have utilized the cloud, but the future presents opportunities to improve critical business services and create entirely new services that leverage on-demand capacity and cost efficiency.

"We're now at the point where our infrastructure and our bandwidth are ready for us to pursue a truly cloud-first approach, but without compromising on cost or security and without being stuck. And NetApp enables that. It enables freedom of choice."

A close working relationship

Personal and professional relationships with the NetApp partner Canary IT have allowed Mr. McLoughlan to worry less about executing a plan and to focus on the strategy behind the technology.

"Each time we do an uplift around any of our equipment that involves Canary IT, I can confidently say we stand back from that and go, 'That was really worthwhile'." It's really ticked the boxes for the things we want to achieve out of this project."

Now, with a refreshed data centre and the ability to fully leverage the cloud for developing new services, Mr. McLoughlan and his team can look to the future and respond quickly to changing demands.

NetApp products

AFF A-Series

ONTAP

"It's easy to perceive technical people as being a bit cut off from the universe, but when you can deliver something that improves what they can deliver to their members, then they know we're paying attention."

Canary Technology Solutions

NetApp