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Success Stories

The Verdict: Alston & Bird Saves Money, Improves Data Protection with NetApp



ALSTON + BIRD_{LLP}

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Industry
Legal

The challenge

Enable “Everything. Everywhere. Always.” initiative, supporting rapid data growth and providing a competitive edge.

The solution

Consolidate storage infrastructure and establish disaster recovery system.

Benefits

- Saved \$700,000 over 5 years by eliminating tape system
- Enhanced business continuity with <10-minute failover to DR site
- Simplified management, enabling IT staff to be reassigned to more strategic tasks
- Experienced no storage-related downtime in 5 years
- Realized complete ROI within 3 years

CUSTOMER PROFILE

Alston & Bird LLP (www.alston.com) is a major U.S. law firm with more than 800 attorneys providing a full range of services to domestic and international clients who conduct business all over the world. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, the firm has been in business since 1893 and has overlaid its broad range of legal skills and business knowledge with a commitment to innovation and technology.

THE CHALLENGE

Law firm sees technology as competitive edge

With more than 20 years managing IT in the legal industry, Robert Marburger, Alston & Bird’s CIO, knows the value of technology: “Time is money at a law firm, so we have to have efficient and reliable systems. Our clients demand that we keep pace with their technology.” Alston & Bird has done more than keep pace: in 2003, it was recognized by *American Lawyer* magazine as the top U.S. law firm based on technology usage.

In 2004, the firm launched its “Everything. Everywhere. Always.” initiative. “It enables our people to work anywhere in the world—a client site, at home, a hotel room, a courtroom—with fast, seamless, around-the-clock access to the same resources they have in the office,” explains Marburger. “It makes

the firm more competitive and helps us attract top talent.”

Such an ambitious information strategy requires a robust, reliable storage infrastructure. “With as many as 300 employees working remotely at any given time, it’s vitally important that all information be reliably protected and constantly available,” asserts Marburger. “That’s why we’re a NetApp shop when it comes to storage.”

When working outside of the office, the firm’s legal professionals now can access a range of productivity applications—from Microsoft® Office to Concordance litigation support software—presented to their laptops via Citrix MetaFrame and VPN. These Microsoft Windows® OS-based applications are hosted on Dell PowerEdge Blade Servers and often with VMware® virtualization. The underlying data for the document management system and several other applications is stored in Microsoft SQL Server™ databases.

Documents: the lifeblood of the law firm

A large part of any law firm’s work revolves around documents. Alston & Bird understands that effective document management can pay off in lower costs, faster response, and better-quality work. The firm recently made the transition to the Interwoven content management system, a replacement for another vendor’s system that simply wasn’t

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Robert Marburger
CIO, Alston & Bird LLP

able to support the firm’s needs. As the firm managed the transition to Interwoven, the value of NetApp became apparent.

“Our unified storage architecture based on NetApp’s technology allowed us to easily change our document management system in midstream,” recalls Marburger. “If we were using a dedicated protocol storage system, we would have had to scramble to modify our architecture before we could make the software change, seriously impacting our ability to serve our clients for days or weeks. Thanks to NetApp’s multiprotocol support, we made the shift with almost no disruption.”

THE SOLUTION

All NetApp storage environment

At the firm’s main data center in Atlanta, more than four million legal documents are stored in a Microsoft SQL Server database on a clustered pair of NetApp® FAS6030 systems. The systems also support Microsoft Exchange 2003 and the Concordance litigation system, along with providing general file shares for the central office.

Alston & Bird currently has five regional offices in the United States. These regional offices access the main data center using redundant high-speed networks, and four of the five have their own NetApp FAS270 systems to store local e-mail and files. The fifth site is able to utilize the high-speed

networks and centralized data storage to save on system and support costs.

Alston & Bird takes full advantage of the flexibility of NetApp’s architecture. “Our instances of Microsoft Exchange and Microsoft SQL Server are connected to NetApp’s storage via a Fibre Channel SAN and iSCSI,” says Marburger. “We also use the iSCSI protocol for our document repository and CIFS for our network-attached file shares. Being able to run multiple protocols on the same storage system gives us tremendous flexibility in configuring our infrastructure.”

Surviving a disaster at the main data center

While Alston & Bird was revamping its document repository, the firm also implemented a disaster recovery system. “By centralizing all of our documents, we put that information potentially at risk in case of a disaster,” Marburger explains. “If something happened in Atlanta, we needed the ability to switch over to an alternate site and continue operations.” The firm called on NetApp’s consulting services for help with planning, architectural design, and implementation of the disaster recovery (DR) plan.

At a colocation DR site in Dayton, Ohio, a pair of clustered NetApp FAS3050 systems holds a mirrored copy of the firm’s legal documents, e-mail, databases, and files.

The main data center and the four regional offices continuously update information to a NetApp FAS3050 system at the DR site using NetApp SnapMirror® software.

“If our data center went down right now, we could switch over to our DR site in 10 minutes,” says Marburger. “All four million documents would be available to our employees, and we could continue serving our clients. With NetApp’s DR infrastructure in place, we are now better protected and can react more quickly to a business continuity situation.”

Eliminating tape in regional offices

As recently as 2003, each of the regional offices had its own backup server, backup software, and tape library—a costly and complex approach. Administering these local backups was a headache for the local office managers and diverted time that was needed for more strategic tasks. So the firm’s IT group did a cost analysis of disk-to-disk backup.

It was an eye-opener for Marburger: “We concluded that, given our data volume, tape was no longer practical. Centralizing backups in the main data center using technology from NetApp would both increase our level of data protection and save money.”

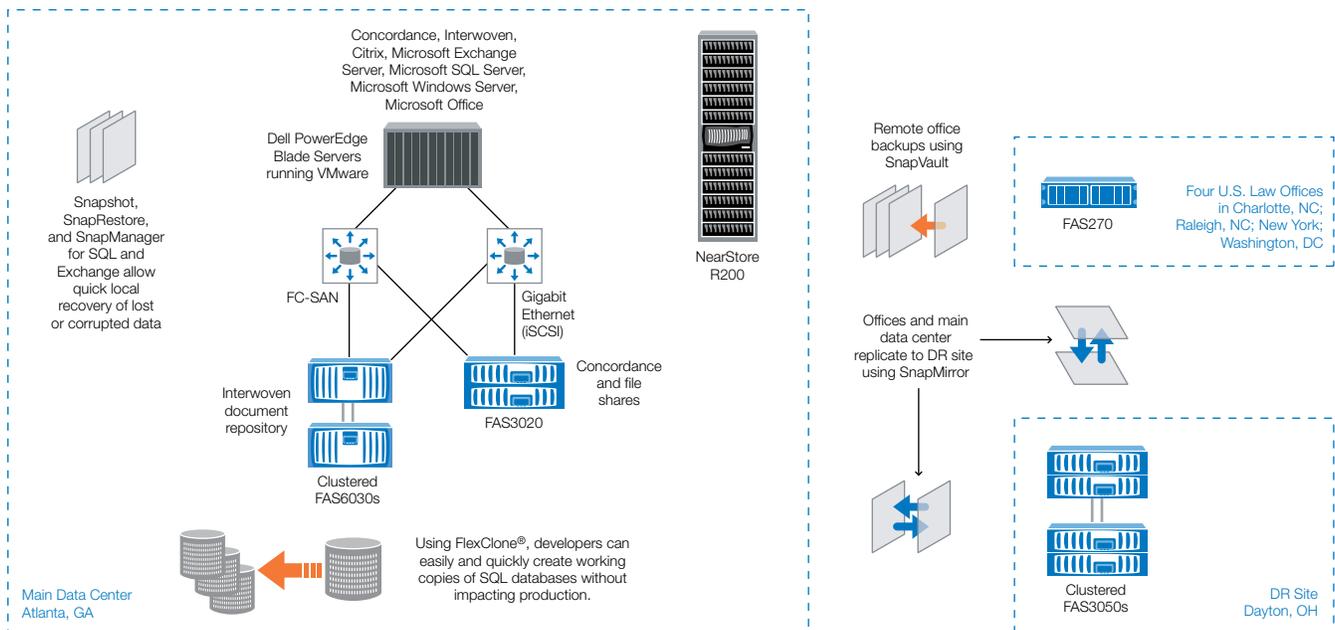


Figure 1) Alston & Bird IT infrastructure.

With help from NetApp Global Services, the firm made the transition to centralized disk backups of its remote offices. Now the FAS270 systems in the regional offices are backed up daily to the main DR site using SnapMirror.

Eliminating the tape system and the staff costs of managing and maintaining local tape backups saved Alston & Bird more than \$700,000 over a five-year period. It also eliminated the need for a full-time tape backup administrator—that person has been reassigned to more strategic tasks.

Keeping up with fast-growing data

Over the last five years, Alston & Bird has experienced exponential data growth—40% per year. This growth promises to continue as new regulations and more complex cases demand ever-more information. It's exactly the kind of environment in which NetApp proves its value.

"NetApp allows us to scale out the infrastructure to quickly respond to business needs," relates Marburger. "The unified storage architecture fully supports our use of virtual servers. NetApp's technology has been fundamental to our ability to keep up with the growth in data. And we've had no storage-related downtime since we switched to NetApp more than five years ago."

NetApp's ease of administration has allowed the firm to keep its staff lean while providing a high quality of service. More important, as Marburger observes, IT professionals now spend their time in different—and more valuable—ways: "Thanks to tools such as NetApp SnapManager® for SQL Server and Exchange, a single administrator can manage more than 145TB of storage. That level of efficiency allows our IT staff to focus on strategic development, not routine administration."

Support and training aid high availability

Even the best infrastructure needs care and feeding to keep it running. Alston & Bird invests in training through NetApp University, building the skills needed to keep the storage subsystem running at peak performance. The firm has a NetApp SupportEdge Premium service contract to provide on-site help when needed. Steve Bevilacqua, the firm's enterprise systems specialist, says, "The support has been fantastic, especially with SnapManager for Exchange and SnapManager for SQL Server."

BUSINESS BENEFITS

Storage flexibility enables more responsive service

The infrastructure at Alston & Bird powered by NetApp has resulted in significant benefits to the firm. Perhaps the greatest is an

enhanced ability to take on the most challenging cases.

"In today's information-dense business environment, taking on a new case means having to quickly ingest huge volumes of data," explains Marburger. "A large and complex business case could involve as much as 2TB of data—e-mail, images, corporate financial data—all of which has to be available and searchable. Before NetApp, that meant ordering and building the server and storage systems, setting up RAID 5, building volumes, configuring systems for specific applications—on and on. It could take weeks.

"It's a different story today. Leveraging NetApp FlexVol® technology, for example, we can allocate and move around virtual volumes in a matter of minutes, so accommodating new case data is fast and efficient. We're ready to bring online massive amounts of data so that our legal teams can begin working immediately for our clients."

Better working environment attracts talent

There's a human side to these IT initiatives: they make Alston & Bird a great place to work. Top law firms compete for top talent, so a highly productive technology environment is a plus for recruiting.

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Robert Marburger
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“We have shown that a law firm can offer a high level of service and maintain a work-life balance,” Marburger observes. “Implementing the right infrastructure has been a win all around, benefiting our staff, clients, and business.” Others have noticed, too: Alston & Bird has been ranked by *FORTUNE* magazine as one of the Top 100 Best Places to Work—eight years in a row!

The jury is in: NetApp pays off

Marburger sums up NetApp’s value to Alston & Bird: “Using NetApp’s unified storage architecture, we’ve consolidated our vital business information across the entire enterprise.” He adds, “We achieved full payback on our ‘Everything. Everywhere. Always.’ initiative in just three years. And we are much more confident of our ability to survive a disaster at our main data center. NetApp has given us the platform to continue to grow our business.”

SOLUTION COMPONENTS

NetApp Products

NetApp FAS3050 storage systems

NetApp FAS6030 storage systems

NetApp FAS270 storage systems

NetApp NearStore® R200 storage system

NetApp Data ONTAP® 7G operating system

NetApp Snapshot™ technology

NetApp FlexVol technology

NetApp SnapVault®

NetApp SnapRestore®

NetApp SnapMirror

NetApp MultiStore®

NetApp SnapManager for Exchange

NetApp SnapManager for SQL Server

NetApp Services

NetApp consulting

NetApp SupportEdge Premium

NetApp University training courses

Environment

Applications: Concordance (litigation management), Interwoven (enterprise content management), Citrix MetaFrame, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Exchange Server, ZANTAZ (e-mail archiving)

Databases: Microsoft SQL Server 2005 Failover Clustering

Server platform: Dell PowerEdge Blade servers running VMware ESX Server and Microsoft Windows Server 2003

Protocols: FC SAN, IP SAN, NAS CIFS, NFS

Users: 1,730 employees

NetApp creates innovative storage and data management solutions that accelerate business breakthroughs and deliver outstanding cost efficiency. Discover our passion for helping companies around the world go further, faster at www.netapp.com.

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