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FBL Financial Group, Inc.

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FBL Financial Group Offers 24/7 Availability for Insurance Services with NetApp

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Industry
Financial services

The Challenge
Give employees and insurance agents fast, 24/7 access to quotes, claims, and business-critical financial applications while reducing costs and improving disaster recovery.

The Solution
Deploy NetApp® storage systems running the NetApp clustered Data ONTAP® OS for nondisruptive operations and use NetApp SnapMirror® software for DR protection.

Benefits
- Provides uninterrupted access to financial services and customer data
- Improves recovery point objective threefold (8 hours versus 24 hours)
- Reduces TCO for storage compared with mainframe environment
- Allows two storage administrators to manage 1.4PB of data

Customer Profile

FBL Financial Group, Inc. (FBL) is a holding company with 1,800 employees and a mission to protect livelihoods and futures. Its primary operating subsidiary, Farm Bureau Life Insurance Company, underwrites and markets a broad range of life insurance and annuities to individuals and businesses. FBL also manages all aspects of two Farm Bureau affiliated property-casualty insurance companies. The companies' insurance products and services are distributed by multiline exclusive Farm Bureau agents. Headquartered in West Des Moines, Iowa, FBL's affiliated insurance companies go to market under the Farm Bureau Financial Services brand and conduct business across a 14-state footprint in the Midwest and Western regions of the country.

The Challenge
Empowering agents with zero downtime

In the insurance industry, operating critical IT systems without downtime is paramount. Customers faced with a catastrophic situation or property loss can't afford to wait—they expect a timely and supportive response from their insurance provider.

FBL's growth strategies spurred challenges in accommodating higher business volumes, more data, and increased demands on core business systems.

As a result, the capabilities of the company's IT and storage systems, including the company's legacy mainframe environment and EMC SAN, were stretched. Monthly planned downtime windows were required, causing a few minutes of inaccessibility for database-driven claims processing, insurance policy management, and financial applications that agents and employees rely on to provide quotes and to service customers. FBL needed a better way to manage growth with greater flexibility and fewer business disruptions.

"Our long-term plan is to reduce our mainframe footprint to reduce costs and increase flexibility," says Joseph (J.B.) Mercer, Senior Technical Administrator at FBL. "So we started migrating applications and data to open systems in a VMware® vSphere® virtual server environment."

Disaster recovery (DR) was also a consideration, because even a few hours of data loss has far-reaching repercussions in the financial services industry.

"I don't know of too many storage platforms besides NetApp that could enable two people to manage 1.4PB of data."

Joseph (J.B.) Mercer
Senior Technical Administrator, FBL

"Nightly tape backups were not enough," says Mercer. "We wanted to improve our recovery point objective by replicating to a DR site throughout the day."

The Solution
Flexible, unified storage for nondisruptive operations

Having already moved some workloads to NetApp FAS6280 and FAS3240 storage systems, FBL decided to consolidate its claims management, agent compensation, and policy administration applications, as well as Microsoft® SQL Server® and IBM DB2 databases onto NetApp. "Our experience with NetApp is a positive one," says Mercer. "The team continually asks for input to understand our challenges and discuss potential solutions. It was natural for us to turn to NetApp for this consolidation."

FBL engaged Datalink, a NetApp partner, to deploy NetApp FAS3250 storage systems running NetApp clustered Data ONTAP in a two-node storage cluster. With clustered Data ONTAP, FBL can keep its applications and databases online while adding disk shelves, upgrading controllers, or load-balancing for capacity or performance.

Corporate file shares and legal hold data are served from the FAS3250 cluster through CIFS, while 1,400 Microsoft Windows®- and Linux®-based virtual machines connect to the cluster over Fibre Channel. "In our opinion, NetApp offered the best solution for multiprotocol storage," says Mercer. "We'll soon be using a lot more NFS, as it provides simplicity and scalability in a VMware environment."

To boost performance for business-critical applications and to save power, cooling, and rack space, FBL uses NetApp Flash Cache™ intelligent caching. "NetApp Flash Cache has been extremely beneficial, giving us more headroom for I/O-hungry applications," says Mercer.

NetApp deduplication and thin provisioning help FBL manage data growth and improve operational efficiency, while NetApp OnCommand® Unified Manager simplifies storage management. NetApp Virtual Storage Console for VMware vSphere lets FBL quickly and easily provision storage from within VMware vCenter™. "NetApp offered the best integration with VMware of any storage vendor we evaluated," says Mercer. "System administration is seamless."

To enhance disaster recovery, FBL deployed NetApp FAS3240 storage systems at a Sungard AS hosting facility, and uses NetApp SnapMirror technology to replicate business-critical data every four to eight hours. NetApp FlexClone® software allows FBL to test DR by using transparent, virtual replication copies, avoiding any business interruption.

Business Benefits
Providing 24/7 availability for insurance services

As FBL moves more of its business-critical applications from a legacy mainframe environment to NetApp clustered Data ONTAP, the company can eliminate downtime and provide the consistent performance its applications require.

"Fast access to data and the ability to handle spikes in demand are critical for our applications," says Kevin Anderson, Director of Infrastructure Technologies at FBL. "I can focus my attention on strategic initiatives because I don't have to worry about our applications and our Microsoft SQL Server and IBM DB2 databases performing well on NetApp storage."

Should a disaster occur at FBL's primary data center, critical data is safe at the DR site. "With NetApp, we'll be able to improve our recovery point objective from 24 hours to 8 hours for most of our production environment," says Mercer.

Responding faster to customer needs

With 24/7 access to applications and data, FBL and its Farm Bureau Financial Services agents can provide fast and accurate customer service, even as the company continues to grow. "With NetApp, we know data will be available when we need it," says Mercer. "When a tragedy strikes, we can process claims on the spot."

"NetApp storage is a big part of our ability to keep applications available and deliver fast performance while making the best use of our IT resources."

Kevin Anderson
Director of Infrastructure Technologies, FBL

Mercer is one of just two storage administrators at FBL. "I don't know of too many storage platforms besides NetApp that could enable two people to manage 1.4PB of data," he says.

Strengthening competitive positioning

Enhanced service and efficiency help FBL and its affiliated insurance companies further differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace. Moving to NetApp is also reducing FBL's total cost of ownership for storage compared with the legacy mainframe environment.

"NetApp storage is a big part of our ability to keep applications available and deliver fast performance while making the best use of our IT resources," Anderson concludes.

SOLUTION COMPONENTS

NetApp Products

NetApp FAS3250 storage systems with clustered Data ONTAP 8.2.1

NetApp FAS6280 and FAS3240 storage systems with Data ONTAP

NetApp OnCommand Unified Manager

NetApp Flash Cache

NetApp FlexClone

NetApp FlexVol

NetApp SnapMirror

NetApp Virtual Storage Console for VMware vSphere

NetApp deduplication

Environment

Applications: Accenture claims management, agent compensation, and FAST policy administration system

Databases: Microsoft SQL Server 2012/2008 and IBM DB2

Operating Systems: Windows Server® 2012/2008 R2 and Red Hat Enterprise Linux

Server virtualization: VMware vSphere 5.5

Network: Cisco Nexus® 7000 series switches

Protocols

FC-SAN, iSCSI, NFS, CIFS

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