

Vanden Broele: e-Hosting in the Clouds

Communications group assures customer service with virtualisation and cloud computing

Not every company working online is an infrastructure expert. But virtualisation can give even small and medium-size companies access to the type of redundant and secure infrastructure only large companies could build themselves. For the communications group Vanden Broele, moving from its own physical infrastructure to virtualisation and cloud computing means it no longer has to worry about outages affecting critical applications – or its clients. But, says Stefaan Vanassche of the IT Business Unit, e-hosting might not be the best choice for everyone – it depends on the situation.



Stefaan Vanassche, Business Unit Manager Novado, Vanden Broele Group, first presented this case at the BELTUG X-change on Desktop Virtualisation Strategies, 7 Dec. 2010

CHALLENGES

Electricity outages hamper critical online applications

Novado is the IT business unit of the Vanden Broele Communications Group, providing online and mobile communications solutions. It hosts and manages online applications for some 2000 clients, and is very active with local municipalities. Located in an industrial park outside Bruges, its critical applications depended on a physical server infrastructure. But by September 2010, this dependency was causing difficulties for the company and its clients. Two power outages in a single month knocked out the servers, and not just briefly – for 3-4 hours each time. Vanden Broele had to find a way to improve redundancy and security

The company had two choices: upgrade and 'professionalise' its own infrastructure, or outsource to an e-hosting provider. "Hosting is not our core business," comments Stefaan. "'Smart content' is. The cost of securing our own infrastructure would have been very high, and we had a very expensive high capacity fibre cable connection. We decided to look into outsourced virtualisation as a solution."

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Stefaan Vanassche, Business Unit Manager Novado, Vanden Broele Group



The Vanden Broele Group is a communications company, a "smart content group" comprised of 4 business units; a graphics company, a publishing company, an advertising & PR agency and an IT division -- Novado. With a staff of 85 people the group focuses on advertising and PR, on graphic automation and publications, online and mobile solutions for communications, on- and offline brand management solutions, and platforms for flexible collaboration. The company offers, amongst others, websites, mobile sites, mobile applications, brand management platforms, content & document management and workflow management. The company hosts online applications and websites for some 2000 clients, especially local authorities.

The Vanden Broele Group has been named an "Ambassador of West Flanders".

SOLUTIONS

e-Hosting for security and infrastructure

After considering several options, Vanden Broele went with virtualisation in a public cloud from long-term supplier Telenet's Hostbasket. As Stefaan explains, this option provides the group with a number of benefits. "They have a much more complete infrastructure security and redundancy than we could have put together. We pay a very simple monthly price for the services we use. If we need more servers, we can activate them with the click of a button, and then pay-per-usage – so it's both scalable and cost-effective. Our office staff appreciates the flexible software: we can manage the servers through browsers ourselves, without calling for assistance. And we no longer pay for the fibre cable."

On the other hand, the new system did have a few bottlenecks. "There was a lot of legacy knowledge in people's heads, so we had to make sure the applications worked the same after the migration – that took a lot of organisation and time. Furthermore, one system administrator was no longer enough: we needed one to support our internal and external customers, and a second to handle the migration. But it's almost complete now."

LESSONS LEARNT

A complex option: consider all the aspects

"For us, e-hosting was the right solution, because of our situation, but it won't necessarily be right for everyone. Upgrading an infrastructure with some servers can be less costly – but won't give you the same professionalism. You have to look at your own situation." The legal aspects also have to be considered: who owns the data? The company made sure that this aspect was carefully covered in the contracts. "Finally, Stefaan says, don't underestimate the complexity and time required for migrating, especially if you have legacy applications: "give yourself the time to get it right."

"In the end," he says, "e-hosting has given us access to an infrastructure that only a very big company could set up. We couldn't have achieved this on our own, but now we can use it to support our core business and competencies."