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Sigma helps Hub International stabilize its data center infrastructure and provide a robust, resilient environment for desktop virtualization.

A robust, stable and secure data center infrastructure is a business essential. As companies grow, however, the data center is not always able to keep pace. Hub International found itself in this predicament, and called upon Sigma Solutions for help.

Headquartered in Chicago, Hub International Ltd. is a leading North American insurance brokerage that provides a broad array of property and casualty, reinsurance, life and health, employee benefits, investment and risk management products and services through offices located in the U.S. and Canada. The company continues to grow rapidly through acquisitions, and needed to stabilize its data center and provide a solid core that could meet future demands.

“Our data center was really falling apart, so our immediate need was basic stabilization,” said Victor Odendaal, Senior Director of Operations, Hub International. “We were looking for good, reliable hardware that we could use and trust and build upon — a modular solution that would not leave us in the lurch a few months or years down the road. That was a key factor, and Sigma delivered.”

From Design to Data Center

Odendaal sat down with the Sigma team and explained Hub’s challenges and the basic requirements for a new data center infrastructure. Sigma designed and architected a solution based upon VMware vSphere 4, and implemented it in a short time frame. The consulting expertise of Sigma’s solutions architects and Sigma’s advanced engineering resources were keys to the success of the project.

“Sigma took the draft of a design and basic requirements and filled in the technical blanks,” Odendaal said. “I told them what we needed and what I was looking for, and they recommended the particular technology solutions

that could meet those requirements. I completely relied upon them for that expertise.”

The engagement led to a completely new data center infrastructure including servers, storage, network and data protection in a service provider facility. VMware vSphere 4 Enterprise Plus Edition enables greater server density for more flexible growth and reduced infrastructure costs.

“It is definitely faster. It’s more stable. It has better redundancy and we’re able to resolve problems quickly without impacting users,” said Odendaal. “Having a more stable environment better supports the business, plus it’s easier to manage.”

Virtual Solution, Real Results

The primary function of the data center is to support the Citrix XenApp environment that Hub’s broad user community relies upon for access to applications. VMware vSphere 4 creates a more stable platform for desktop virtualization.

“We were looking to utilize virtualization at a much deeper level than we had,” Odendaal said. “We use Citrix XenApp for our clients, so we have a lot of virtual machines. We knew that VMware would enable us to virtualize and consolidate that environment.

“The solution Sigma implemented gave us exactly what we wanted. We are sitting at almost 90 percent virtualization in the data center right now. As our company keeps growing through acquisitions, we are better positioned to support that growth.”

Redundancy was also important to Hub. The company decided to utilize VMware because of its robust failover capabilities.

“In our original data center we were running two different server virtualization platforms, VMware and Citrix. We decided to standardize on VMware. In

my experience, Citrix is good at virtualization from a client perspective but somewhat behind VMware on the server virtualization side — especially when it comes to failover. VMware’s vMotion technology enables live migration of virtual machines from one physical server to another with zero downtime and no end-user impact. It’s a lot more robust, a lot more failsafe, and we felt more comfortable with it,” said Odendaal.

The Right Partner

That comfort level also extended to Sigma Solutions. Odendaal had worked with Sigma for about five years, and appreciated the technical abilities of Sigma’s engineers.

“I actually worked for Sigma for a while, on a contract basis, helping out with project management,” he said. “I got a firsthand look at the capabilities of the team — their knowledge, their expertise, their business focus, their priorities and all those kinds of things.

“When I came here, I needed somebody that I could partner with. Many vendors offered their services, but I didn’t really have the confidence in them or the relationship with them that I had with Sigma. I knew that the folks at Sigma would really get involved in the issues and take the time to understand our needs. I like the way they work with people and the energy they bring to a project. That was pretty much the point for me.”

Odendaal got the chance to know Sigma even better over the course of this project. With a short time frame for completion, Sigma’s engineers worked very closely with the Hub IT team on a tight schedule.

“We worked long hours and weekends to get it finished. But Sigma is very good and was able to deliver without any problems,” Odendaal said.