NIMBLE GROUP

OVERVIEW

Nimble Group located in Cape Town, South Africa was no stranger to Digium when the company IT manager called on Clarotech, a Digium partner, to build a scalable telephony system to support the rapid growth of their call center. Nimble Group is a leading credit management company providing an extensive range of services that include outsourced receivables management, collection services, and credit-risk consulting. Two years ago, Clarotech installed a single SUSE® Linux Enterprise Server running Asterisk open source software, designed to support the 20-person call center with growth projections for up to 60 tele-representatives in the next year.

Having expanded tenfold in the past two years due to a major corporate acquisition of Norman Bissett & Associates in early 2010, the Nimble Group expanded into two call centers in Cape Town, and sought to build an infrastructure to support an existing staff of 350 – 400 representatives, with plans for 750-1,000 callers by the end of 2011. Clarotech, armed with the power and flexibility of Asterisk, was called upon to provide a solution that could handle the mandate. “There may have been some pressure on the CEO to consider other options, but Nimble Group’s IT manager has seen Asterisk’s stability and cost effectiveness. I don’t think he ever really considered another option,” says Clarotech technical director, Tony Russell, whose job it was to implement the new system. Tony added, “Later, the CEO said that in his research, three separate companies recommended Clarotech for implementing Asterisk. He said to us, ‘Why should I consider anything else… just get on with it!’”

CHALLENGE

Asterisk Offers Solution to Help 60-Person Call Center in Cape Town, South Africa Grow to 750+

Two years ago, Clarotech installed a single non-redundant server on which Asterisk could connect up to 60 calls simultaneously. “The client explained there is a rhythm active throughout a large call center,” explains Colin Fair, Clarotech managing director. “If the system goes down and everyone in a particular quadrant is affected, then the energy level of everyone around them goes down as well.” The pressure was on for Clarotech to install a scalable and fully redundant solution. They chose the Intel Modular Server with six separate compute modules and a built-in Storage Area Network (SAN) as the platform. According to Marius Smith, Nimble Group’s chief Information officer, “One module runs the database for Asterisk, one handles incoming calls, and the remaining four are split into two
dual-node clusters that manage the thousands of outgoing calls we make every day.” Configured in pairs, the modules (or servers) were scattered randomly across four quadrants of the call center. Each capable of handling 200 calls at a time, by scattering them throughout the call center, only one in four representatives would know if a server went down, thereby causing little if any disruption of workflow in the event of failure. Furthermore, with each server acting as backup, no caller should be down more than two minutes at a time.

The use of Asterisk, free open source software, in a market where there is a lot of emphasis placed on minimal cost and increased efficiency, put a lot of pressure on Clarotech to build new infrastructure that would support such a large-scale deployment of the software. Installing SUSE Linux Enterprise servers from Novell was part of that strategy. “Price is important but not exclusive,” Fair says. “Knowing Asterisk the way we do, functionality and reliability is Asterisk’s biggest advantage and that gave us the confidence everything would work as designed.”

Some small aspects caused some delays in set up, although nothing that threw Clarotech off schedule. First, call centers are not nine-to-fivers. They have two shifts that work from 7:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. There are some complex web-based applications tied into call functionality like QueueMetrics management that provide detailed information about every call. Since downtime in a call center has a price tag attached, Clarotech had to be certain about their processes to make sure these apps were fully functional at all times.

The move into a new building and limitations by the local government to only 750 agents presented a challenge to the Clarotech implementation. Often they were ahead of other technicians getting the building in working order, and more than once, Clarotech had to wait for the electricians to finish wiring before they could move forward. Merging three companies into one presented its own set of problems, as Clarotech had to wait for the installation of 170 new computers. In addition, the overall telephony platform had to be enhanced in order to handle the increased demand and sometimes there was a bottleneck of technical issues holding up the techs ability to deliver.

According to Smith, “Our business runs on telephony, so it was critical to get this new solution up and running as quickly as possible. The Clarotech team has good understanding of our business as well as excellent technical skills, and they deserve a lot of credit for delivering the project on time, even when delays on the hardware held up the implementation, they made sure the deadline didn’t slip.”

It took a lot of strong planning with some aggressive deadlines but fortunately, Nimble Group had a core group of people who were accustomed to the phone system and the interface between Asterisk and Excalibur, the debt management software. “We focused on building an expandable, reliable, redundant system that would continue to be effective even if something went wrong,” says Fair.

“Open source software is growing in popularity because companies are beginning to see that when implemented properly, it provides effective and economical solutions,” says Tony Russell. “In the instance of Asterisk, its power is its flexibility and ability to be tailored to any scenario. Technicians mostly drive the open source industry right now because if the user isn’t familiar with or doesn’t understand open source applications, they feel more secure buying an end-user product in a pretty cellophane-wrapped package. Most of the time they will pay more and probably not get nearly as effective and especially as scalable a product.”

According to Fair, “Partnering with Clarotech, Nimble Group received the wealth of knowledge needed to develop and customize their Asterisk solution, and we have a happy customer.”
The project begun around Christmas 2008 for 60 users, and increased to 1,000 users less than two years later, was complete in July 2010. The current combination of Asterisk software, SUSE Linux Enterprise Servers, and SUSE Linux Enterprise High Availability Extension, provides Nimble Group with a mature and flexible telephony solution that still provides for future growth.