



Frontline Insurance prepares to weather future storms



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*Kurt Bonigut, Chief Technology Officer,
Frontline Homeowners Insurance*

Customer profile

FRONTline
HOMEOWNERS INSURANCE

Company Frontline
Homeowners Insurance
Industry Insurance
Country United States
Employees < 200
Web site
frontlinehomeownersinsurance.com

Challenge

To support continued growth, Frontline Homeowners Insurance needed a highly scalable, centralized, easy-to-manage data storage solution that could automatically tier storage to make the most cost-effective use of disk space while providing maximum availability for applications and databases.

Solution

The company implemented a Dell™ Compellent Storage Center SAN, part of the Dell Fluid Data™ architecture. The integrated solution includes automated tiered storage, continuous snapshots and boot from SAN capabilities to improve management efficiency and reduce downtime.

Benefits

- Single, integrated solution simplifies storage administration and enables IT staff to focus on innovative business processes
- No downtime due to storage in almost five years
- Automated tiered storage provides cost-effective utilization

Application areas

- Disaster Recovery
- Intelligent Data Management
- Virtualization

Several years of above-average hurricane activity in the area have given Florida's Frontline Homeowners Insurance (Frontline) many opportunities to prove its reputation for providing superior service throughout the claims process. Today, Frontline is a leader in the home insurance industry serving the owners of high-end coastal homes. Frontline has dramatically increased its customer base since its inception in 1998.

"We've had no downtime related to storage in almost five years. This is due to the quality of the Dell Compellent SAN and the competence of the support organization we've developed with Dell Compellent Copilot and Dell's partner, StorCom."

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The IT group wanted to ensure business continuity and improve systems uptime. "We can't let a faulty disk drive or server failures interrupt our business," says Kurt Bonigut, Frontline's chief technology officer. "But we also need to be prepared for larger-scale problems, such as hurricanes. If it takes us days to recover from a storm, the impact to our business could be dramatic. We needed a storage solution that would help us ensure high availability so we can provide immediate support for our agents and customers."

To support the continued growth of the company's primarily Web-based business, Bonigut recognized the need for a highly scalable, easy-to-manage data storage solution. "We lacked a single, centralized storage solution," says Bonigut. "As a result, our IT group spent a lot of time on administration when we could have focused on more innovative projects. We needed a cohesive storage strategy to give us both scalability and simplified administration."

Integrated solution simplifies storage management

After evaluating solutions from other vendors, the Frontline IT group selected a Dell Compellent Storage Center storage area network (SAN). Based on a Dell Fluid Data™ architecture that leverages policy-based automation for block, file and object-based data, the Dell Compellent SAN combines capability with flexibility, allowing organizations to scale up and out seamlessly.

The Dell Compellent SAN stood out for the Frontline IT group, because it offers a single, integrated storage solution. "None of the other competing vendors could provide the same level of integration. Managing a bunch of poorly integrated applications is too much work," says Bonigut. "We now have an integrated, best-of-breed storage offering at a price point that other vendors cannot touch."

Technology at work

Hardware

Dell™ Compellent Storage Center SAN

Software

Dell Compellent Data Instant Replay

Dell Compellent Dynamic Capacity

Dell Compellent Enterprise Manager

Linux®

Microsoft® Exchange Server 2010

Microsoft SQL Server®

Oracle

VMware

Windows Server®



The system's level of integration helps simplify management. "We can manage all of our storage tasks easily through a centralized administrative console. We didn't need to hire more people or acquire new skills," says Bonigut. "The ease of management has freed our staff to work on other projects, and we've also eliminated a lot of worry time—we no longer have to worry about storage management or data protection with the Dell Compellent SAN."

Upgrade seamless to users

Frontline recently upgraded to a new dual-controller Dell Compellent SAN with 21 terabytes of storage. "The fact that we've chosen to make another investment in Dell Compellent and upgrade off the older hardware speaks well of our trust in both Compellent and Dell," says Bonigut.

The migration was non-disruptive to users. "We were able to copy across from SAN to SAN which made things really simple and straightforward for us," says Bonigut. "It just went really smoothly. No one even knew we were migrating."

Consistent snapshots and boot from SAN improve systems uptime

The integrated boot from SAN functionality of the Dell Compellent SAN enables seamless recovery of critical applications. According to Bonigut, boot from SAN was a primary reason for selecting Dell Compellent originally. If one of Frontline's blade servers fails, he can boot up a standby directly from the SAN and bring the application back online in about 15 minutes. Previously, it might have taken hours or days.

"Our business is largely Web-based, so we depend on the availability of our applications," says Bonigut. "We can achieve the high availability we need to keep our business operational with the Dell Compellent SAN."

The Frontline IT group employs Dell Compellent Data Instant Replay to enhance its data backup and recovery strategy. "The Dell Compellent snapshot feature augments our existing disk-based backup solution. Now we can create space-efficient Replays every 15 minutes. If there is a problem, we can recover to a Replay and maintain high uptime," says Bonigut. "Replays also help us test new software patches and updates. We take a snapshot before updating. If there's a problem with the update, we can immediately roll to the previous state."

Frontline also purchased blade servers and decided to virtualize all of them with VMware software. "Seeing how well Dell Compellent works with VMware has been another huge bonus for us," says Bonigut. "We have 60 virtual servers running on six blades with Microsoft Exchange 2010, Oracle databases and Microsoft SQL Server databases virtualized and running well."

No downtime in five years

Dell Compellent Copilot Support engineers and VMware worked together to solve any challenges that arose in the virtualization process. "Copilot Support and VMware worked together, and the Dell Compellent engineers possess a good understanding of how VMware works. These factors were essential in being able to hone in on issues," says Bonigut.

Frontline also uses the services of Dell Compellent partner StorCom, based in Chicago. "StorCom functions as a storage engineering arm of our team. So that as we're making changes, as we purchase and implement a new SAN and as we deal with our migration, we're able to work with a reseller who has the engineering skills to help us to get the job done. As a result, we've had no downtime related to storage in almost five years. This is due to the quality of the Dell Compellent SAN and the

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In addition, application speeds have improved, especially for I/O intensive applications. "With VMware, we're able to allocate processor and memory on the fly which is great for us," says Bonigut. "The VMware implementation coupled with the speed of the storage sitting behind us definitely gets quicker response times for our critical applications and a fantastic degree of availability to migrate servers between VMware nodes."

Data center virtualization creates resilient infrastructure

To create a cost-effective and easy-to-manage data protection strategy that fully leverages boot from SAN and Replays, Bonigut relies on the powerful combination of VMware and the single pool of virtual storage provided by the Dell Compellent SAN. "The VMware software allows us to take full advantage of the Dell Compellent boot from SAN and Replay functionality to provide a simple, failsafe environment for rapid recovery of critical systems. We like the approach of not having to manage virtual server disk files while also being able to leverage the unmatched snapshot and replication technologies of the Dell Compellent SAN. VMware allowed us to do this simply and seamlessly in our current environment."

Consolidating servers and storage into a virtual infrastructure reduced the footprint required to house Frontline's data, an important consideration given the expense of a co-located facility. In

addition, the Frontline IT team found the combination of Dell Compellent and VMware simpler to manage. "Managing a virtual pool of storage and servers just makes our jobs easier," says Bonigut. "Using Dell Compellent and VMware together provides huge time savings. Converting from physical to virtual servers is as simple as managing raw disks. We can manage everything through the Dell Compellent Storage Center SAN, without adding another layer on top."

A competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace

The Frontline IT team uses Dell Compellent Enterprise Manager every day to monitor usage and check the health of the environment. "The interface for managing Dell Compellent storage is industry leading," says Bonigut. "StorCom helped us train one of our engineers to use the tool in a matter of days to create volumes, map them, manage Replays and see what's going on from a storage perspective. This makes us a more efficient team."

Ultimately, the Dell Compellent SAN is helping Frontline achieve a competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace. "We need a robust IT infrastructure to effectively respond to our customers when they need us most," says Bonigut. "The Dell Compellent SAN simplifies storage management, gives us the scalability for future growth and enables us to enhance our uptime so we can respond to crises when they arise. And that means we're in a much better position to support our agents and our customers, whatever the weather."

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