

Practising what it preaches

Virtualisation came to the rescue in the middle of a complex IT replacement project, writes GORDON SMITH

WHEN the technology supplier A&O Systems and Services Ireland was in line to replace a substantial number of its servers as part of a technology change project last year, the company decided to treat the project the same as if it was dealing with one of its customers.

A&O consolidated its various application servers into a smaller pool of virtualised servers, reducing the total number of physical machines from 24 to three. "We were at a point where we needed to upgrade anyway, so we thought: why not practise what we preach? We sold it into the business based on the business benefit," explains Howard Roberts, principal consultant, A&O.

The server consolidation project came about because A&O Group had come to the end of its IT support contract following its acquisition of the EDS European Global Field Services business unit in Ireland. Once the support period had expired, A&O's Irish arm faced the prospect of increased cost for the same service. As the company was an existing partner of Eircom, it turned to the telecoms provider for hosting services.

First, A&O used its own virtualisation team to consolidate its hardware, with the new virtualised servers now hosted at Eircom's facility at Crown Alley in Dublin. Roberts says this is now the primary site for A&O's systems, with the company's own Sandyford office acting as a fallover disaster recovery site.

"Our own office acts as our own disaster recovery copy. The primary copy is in the data centre," he explains. The two locations are connected by a 100Mbps Metro Ethernet link and the virtual machines are replicated between both sites, making a full system recovery possible within an hour.

Core to A&O's business is the ability to provide managed remote support to its clients. "We have clients accessing our systems remotely. They can get access to our service desk," says Brian Guiry, senior account manager with A&O. The new arrangement will allow the company to continue providing this service even when demand rises.

"The advantage of it being in a data centre is, there's no need to change links or speeds. With our systems based in Eircom's data centre, we can turn the volume up or down as required," adds Guiry.

Having proven the concept by itself, A&O has partnered with Eircom to provide this disaster recovery and remote monitoring service to customers. As a result of the virtualisation and managed hosting approach, A&O made a 50pc saving in operational cost and an 80pc reduction in server numbers.

Roberts says many customers opting for this virtualisation-based service would typically see an even greater reduction in hardware requirements than that which A&O realised. "The three-to-one reduction would be small by most people's standards. We don't even fill the one rack we have."

This saving on space means a lower cost of service for A&O, which only has to pay for a single server rack in Eircom's data centre, instead of the three it would have needed if it had replaced the 24 older machines for new ones.

With positive numbers like those, it's not surprising more businesses are becoming interested in the return on investment virtualisation offers. "People are looking at it with a business-critical eye and it stacks up," says Guiry, pointing out that it is only one element of a



Howard Roberts, principal consultant, A&O

managed IT hosting service. "You don't go in saying, 'Here's virtualisation'.

"It's part of a solution. The first part is server consolidation where you're coming up to the end of life of hardware, or the end of a support contract. Typically you replace physical machines with physical machines; instead you can virtualise and run applications together on a single box."

Roberts says the issue is no longer about convincing customers of virtualisation's merits, but to see it in a broader business context. "Some 80-90pc of customers we talk to at the moment would have virtualisation to some extent. Trying to convert people to virtualisation is not the issue any more, it's getting them to use it more efficiently than they currently are. When trying to sell this, you can sell it more easily if you

can widen the benefits scope."

Chief among these benefits is the disaster recovery potential that this service offers. With virtualisation, critical systems can be mirrored in two different locations, so that the business experiences no downtime in the event of systems in one site going offline.

"You can virtualise your production environment and have failover within an agreed service level agreement very quickly - full system recovery in under one hour without having to go into huge cost. Previously, you would have needed to go into wide area clustering. Now with virtualisation you can start doing clever things at a very reasonable cost," says Roberts.

"It's a more compelling story from a financial officer's point of view," he concludes.