

Case study

Gore Mutual right-sizes network to drive 7% annual growth



Boosts performance 400% to endpoints while simplifying network management

Industry

Insurance

Objective

Simplify network connections, boost availability and provide increased bandwidth and performance

Approach

Move toward a virtualized network for increased uptime, improved redundancy and a reduction in infrastructure and management complexity boosts performance 400% to endpoints while simplifying network management

IT matters

- Reduces cabling complexity by 80%
- Boosts performance at the endpoint by 400%
- Saves months of IT planning time with live OS and firmware updates
- Virtualizes the network creating a single logical device

Business matters

- Avoids proprietary solutions and vendor lock-in
- Provides right-sized networking environment at lower cost
- Delivers necessary performance to drive up to 7% annual revenue growth
- Eliminates network complexity with simplified management in a single pane of glass

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– Kevin O’Kane, Manager of IT Operations, Gore Mutual Insurance Company

For almost two centuries, Gore Mutual Insurance Company has been a leader in the Canadian insurance industry. To stay ahead of the technology curve, Gore Mutual teamed with HP partner OnX Enterprise Solutions to deploy right-sized networking solutions, driving 400% performance increases and supporting up to more than 7% annual revenue growth.

A firm foundation

For almost two centuries Gore Mutual Insurance Company has been a leading provider of insurance solutions in Canada. Gore Mutual takes things a step further by giving back to the communities it serves with a foundation that promotes education, health and youth initiatives.

Longevity and goodwill can go a long way in word-of-mouth referrals, but neither can help an organization remain relevant in the technological landscape of today's business world. That's why Gore Mutual stays on top of developments and pushes the boundaries of technology in its own data centers to offer new services to its customers and agents alike. Recent offerings include a new electronic document system that simplifies workflows for agents, and a big data solution to help underwriters generate business quotes faster and more accurately.

So when the networking environment at Gore Mutual began to show its age, its IT team started looking for solutions that would accommodate growth and innovation for the next 5-7 years. "We were operating with networking gear that was seven to eight years old, and had reached the end of its lifecycle for us," recalls Kevin O'Kane, manager of IT operations at Gore Mutual. "We couldn't risk having performance concerns, as well as sudden, unplanned drops in service levels that would impact our IT team as well as the users of our 1,000 or so endpoints."

Imagining a better network

Both the age and the design of the existing network were causes of concern. "We had redundancy, but not all of our systems could load-balance properly," O'Kane says. "We have a number of systems we publish to our customers through web portals, and any kind of outage there could be catastrophic."

The team began looking for solutions in tandem with a server refresh. "We weren't just looking to upgrade our network, we were looking to rebuild our data center," O'Kane relates. With a long history of HP in its server racks, Gore Mutual began to weigh the pros and cons of leading technology solutions including Converged Infrastructure from HP.

"We thought, as long as we're doing both upgrades, we might as well look at the advantages of bundling networking and servers," O'Kane recalls. So the team decided to evaluate both solutions from a bundled-service perspective, but stepped back from the idea when one vendor began pushing a deployment that seemed too big for Gore Mutual's needs.

Ruling out wrong-sized solutions

"There were a few problems with this bundled approach," explains O'Kane. "First, the solution they were proposing seemed like it was forcing us to make too much of a commitment to one specific technology, and it wasn't going to integrate that well with some existing technology we wanted to keep."

"Secondly, the cost of the system the vendor was proposing seemed too high. We're a business, and the bottom line is important to us—we didn't want to be locked in to a solution that would end up costing us more in the long term," O'Kane says.

The third concern was that the network architecture still wasn't right for Gore Mutual. "We really needed more features than the vendor's small-business series, and we didn't need all the bells and whistles of its enterprise series," O'Kane recalls. "And they were really selling us on the more expensive equipment because they said it would give us the full impact of their integrated network-server solution. In the end, they ended up proposing a hybrid network, which would have meant deploying two separate networks to get the features we wanted."

Right-sizing the network

So the team disengaged from the bundled approach and set out to get the network they wanted and the compute resources they needed individually. One thing O'Kane and team realized when they engaged with HP partner OnX Enterprise Solutions: HP delivered a solution that was right-sized for Gore Mutual's business.

"We felt like HP offered a tier of product that's missing from most network vendors' portfolios," O'Kane explains. "We're not a small business, and we're not an enterprise—HP understands that, and offers a rich feature set for customers our size."

To provide the network environment to drive it's up to 10% year-over-year revenue growth, Gore Mutual chose HP Networking solutions, including HP 7500 Switch Series network cores, HP 5800 series switches configured in the top of racks and HP 5500 series switches at the network edge. Along with HP's Intelligent Resilient Framework (IRF) technology and Intelligent Management Center (IMC) software, Gore Mutual got not just the right-sized network, but one that is easier to manage as well.

"We spent a lot of time looking at the options, and we can't overstate the value of the HP feature set. With IRF, we've virtualized our network—the whole network becomes a single logical device—which makes it much easier to manage," O'Kane explains.

Saving months of planning, weekends of maintenance

For instance, O'Kane and team can now perform live updates without incurring downtime or bringing network traffic to a halt. "Live updates are huge for us," O'Kane says. "With our previous network, our OS and firmware had gotten terribly out of date because it was such a significant effort to bring down the network in order to perform the maintenance."

In order to bring the network down, the team had to bring all its servers offline—about 200 of them—in a very specific shut-down and boot-up order. "The whole process would take at least a month of advance planning and then a full weekend shutdown," recalls O'Kane.

Today, when the team needs to perform maintenance on its HP network, the network and servers don't have to be shut down. "We can manage our updates now in just a few hours—it's a huge time saver," O'Kane says. "And really it's better for the network, because we're much more likely to update our hardware now that it's become more manageable."

80% reduction in cabling complexity

The team from Gore Mutual, HP partner OnX Enterprise Solutions and HP Technology Services performed the upgrade collaboratively over two weekends with oversight from OnX and installation and configuration by HP Technology Services. "It was really more than just a network upgrade—it was more like a rebuild of the whole data center—but it went off without a hitch. On the following Monday, there was no fallout whatsoever," O'Kane recalls.

During the deployment—which also included the installation of HP BladeSystem c7000 Enclosures and HP ProLiant Server Blades—Gore Mutual and OnX Enterprise Solutions replaced hundreds of 1 Gb server-to-network connections with consolidated 10 Gb connections. "We literally pulled out miles of copper cable, and reduced our total cabling complexity by 80%," O'Kane says.

400% performance increase

By purchasing a right-sized solution and modernizing its network architecture, the Gore Mutual technology environment is running a lot smoother these days. "We have no slowdown, stability or congestion problems—our help desk staff just doesn't have to deal with those kinds of calls," O'Kane says.

Beyond simply reducing problems and complaints, the new HP network offers enough of a performance boost to accommodate growth for the foreseeable future. "During our tests, we saw an improvement of 400% throughput at our client endpoints," O'Kane says. "It's a noticeable performance boost."

Teamwork pays off

Even though the Gore Mutual team decided to choose both its networking and server vendors on their merits, they ended up picking HP solutions on both fronts. "We were always

Customer at a glance:

Applications

- Microsoft Active Directory
- Microsoft SQL Server 2005, 2008, 2012 Clusters
- Microsoft Exchange Server 2010
- Microsoft Dynamics CRM
- HP Dialogue Live Software
- VMware vSphere 4.1, 5.1

Hardware

- HP 7500 Switch Series
- HP 5800 Switch Series
- HP 5500 Switch Series
- HP BladeSystem c7000 Enclosures
- HP ProLiant BL460c Server Blades
- HP ProLiant DL360, DL380 Servers

Software

- HP Intelligent Management Center (IMC) Enterprise Software Platform
- HP Intelligent Resilient Framework (IRF)

HP Services

- HP Technology Services

comfortable with HP in our server racks from the beginning, and I think what we learned was that going with HP for both networking and server solutions didn't really lock us into HP for the future.

"We actually have a more open architecture now than we would have gotten with any other vendor. From a networking standpoint, the feature set of HP offers us the features and flexibility of the higher profile network vendor without the extra expense," O'Kane explains.

With the help of OnX Enterprise Solutions, life after the deployment has been more productive and less complicated. Gore Mutual also engaged HP Technology Services to navigate a major switch in network carriers and architect the overall solution. "OnX Enterprise Solutions worked seamlessly with HP sales and HP Technology Services on our data center refresh. They gave us access to the resources we needed, produced results on their commitments, and ensured we got great pricing on our orders," O'Kane says.

"With HP Networking and HP BladeSystem in our environment, we now have the stability we always wanted, a simplified physical network profile, full redundancy across systems, and the throughput and bandwidth we need to meet the challenges facing us over the next five years."

Company Profile

For almost two centuries Gore Mutual has been a leader in the Canadian insurance industry. Its commitment to service and excellence has been recognized by insurance broker associations and customers alike. The company offers commercial and personal insurance through their head office in Cambridge, Ontario and their Western Region office in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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