



Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Local government

Customer Profile

Matanuska-Susitna Borough of Alaska was incorporated in 1964. Its manager form of government serves approximately 75,000 people located across a 24,000-square-mile area.

Business Situation

Matanuska-Susitna Borough wanted to lower IT costs and improve services by simplifying its network infrastructure, centralizing management, and reducing maintenance costs.

Solution

The borough migrated its server operating and messaging systems from Novell to a solution based on Microsoft® Windows Server System™ integrated server software.

Benefits

- One-year payback on investment due to lower licensing and maintenance costs
- Reduced travel expenses due to remote management capabilities
- Cost savings of more than 60 percent
- Improved efficiency and services

Alaska Borough Reduces Costs, Improves Services with Switch from Novell to Windows

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Tom Blackley, IT Manager, Matanuska-Susitna Borough

Matanuska-Susitna Borough of Alaska uses many line-of-business applications to support local government. But the borough’s IT staff found it cumbersome to manage the applications within its Novell-based infrastructure, and the borough’s more than 400 full-time, part-time, and temporary employees experienced difficulties using the GroupWise messaging system to communicate with users of other systems. To lower costs, centralize management, and improve efficiency, the borough switched to a solution based on Microsoft® Windows Server™ 2003 and Microsoft Exchange Server 2003. The new solution has helped the IT department reduce costs by more than 60 percent through increased operational efficiency, higher self-sufficiency, and lower licensing costs, while improving response time to employee IT issues and providing better communication and productivity tools for those employees.



“We needed to create an environment that would allow us to globally manage our line-of-business applications from a central management console, lower costs, and improve productivity. We needed to consolidate to a single platform.”

Tom Blackley, IT Manager, Matanuska-Susitna Borough

Situation

Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough, a political subdivision of the State of Alaska, is situated in south-central Alaska and encompasses more than 24,000 square miles of remote wilderness including mountain ranges, wetlands, tundra, glaciers, rivers, and lakes, as well as farmland and towns. Mat-Su is roughly equivalent in size to the state of West Virginia, is home to approximately 75,000 people, and is the fastest-growing region in Alaska. More than 400 full-time, part-time, and temporary local government employees in 15 divisions provide services to borough inhabitants, including emergency services, property assessment, land use planning, geographic information systems (GISs), and more.

As part of a government agency accountable to Mat-Su inhabitants, the borough's IT staff strives toward fiscal responsibility. Increasing operating efficiency and lowering costs are top concerns. In addition, because the borough represents a largely rural environment lacking the abundance of IT resources and outside consultants found in the contiguous United States, its IT staff aims for self-sufficiency in order to successfully support the government's essential services.

Mat-Su Borough previously relied on a Novell-based infrastructure for its server operating and messaging systems. The IT department manages and maintains a variety of line-of-business (LOB) applications, such as finance and assessment programs, used by Mat-Su employees to support government functions. Because these applications are optimized for the Windows® operating system, it was time-consuming and cumbersome to manage them within the Novell-based infrastructure.

For example, the borough uses a records management system that requires the Active Directory® directory service, a component of Windows that provides the means to manage

identities and relationships within a network. Because the borough also used Novell Directory Services (NDS), the IT department had to synchronize NDS with Active Directory in order to support the records management system. The IT staff spent a great deal of time keeping the users' profiles and passwords synchronized.

“In spite of our efforts to synchronize information between the two directory services, we still had a less than satisfactory experience,” says Harry Banks, Programmer Analyst, Information Technology, Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

The borough used Novell GroupWise as its messaging system, which presented further integration issues for the IT staff and made it difficult for borough employees to communicate efficiently with users of other e-mail systems. It was hard for employees to send meeting requests to users outside the GroupWise system and to generate contact information from e-mail messages sent from programs other than GroupWise. In addition, the lack of integration between GroupWise and Microsoft® Office programs created inefficiencies for workers and a higher need for IT support.

“The world has embraced Microsoft,” says Tom Blackley, IT Manager for Matanuska-Susitna Borough. “Because we were on a different platform than most everyone we worked with, integration and interoperability issues made it difficult for employees to perform even the simplest tasks.”

Blackley realized that, if the borough didn't simplify its infrastructure, it would face even more complex issues in the future, increasing maintenance costs and not achieving the high level of service to the community that he envisioned. “We needed to create an environment that would allow us to globally manage our line-of-business applications

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Solution

Faced with expiring Novell licenses, Blackley discovered that the costs of migrating to the Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system and Microsoft Exchange Server 2003 communication and collaboration server, both part of Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software, would be significantly less costly than renewing the Novell licenses. Even so, it was the long-term benefits, Blackley says, that finalized the decision to convert to the Windows environment. In addition to the initial cost savings, Blackley concluded that Matanuska-Susitna Borough would spend less to maintain a Microsoft-based network infrastructure. And the borough would have a strong foundation on which to build self-service, Web-based applications for the Mat-Su community.

In June 2005, with the help of Arctic Information Technology, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner based in Anchorage, Alaska, the borough began the migration. Arctic IT provided project management services for the duration of the project. Together, Arctic and Blackley's IT group conducted essential planning and mapping steps such as the development of a six-week project schedule that defined each IT staff member's tasks for the migration by the half day, plus thorough documentation of the borough's existing network.

“Due to careful planning and consistent teamwork, no one ever walked in the door not knowing what his or her tasks were for the day,” says Banks. “And we never strayed from the project schedule by more than one day.”

A second partner aided in the actual migration. Quest Software, also a Microsoft

Gold Certified Partner, develops software solutions that help enterprises achieve better performance and productivity from their applications, databases, and infrastructure. Quest conducted the migration in two stages: first the server operating system and then the messaging system.

Quest NDS Migrator, a solution that accelerates and simplifies migration from NDS to Active Directory, aided in the switch from Novell NetWare 6.5 to Windows Server 2003. Key functionality of NDS Migrator includes premigration mapping and planning, and automated migration of an organizational unit directory structure to Active Directory. The Quest solution was tested in a lab environment that mimicked the Mat-Su Borough production server environment, and the procedure was documented. Following a small and successful pilot implementation, the enterprisewide migration was completed in approximately three weeks, by the end of July 2005.

In August 2005, Arctic IT and Blackley's group began the migration from GroupWise to Exchange Server. After a pilot migration using Quest GroupWise Migrator for Exchange, a software solution that converts users' mail, calendars, tasks, and personal address books to new mailboxes stored in Exchange Server, 432 user mailboxes were successfully converted. The Quest solution was chosen for its ability to perform an enterprise migration with true coexistence, meaning that both the old and the new environments function during the migration, allowing users to continue to exchange messages and schedule meetings whether or not their mailboxes have been migrated. The conversion from GroupWise to Exchange Server was completed in September 2005.

According to Arctic IT, there was no unplanned downtime during the switch and planned downtime was scheduled outside

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Tom Blackley, IT Manager, Matanuska-Susitna Borough

business hours. Blackley concurs, “There was no loss of services or severe interruptions during either migration. It was a mutually successful experience the whole way. All the heavy lifting was done in the beginning, through careful planning and documentation.”

The solution includes a primary server computer site within the borough administrative building, and four secondary server computer sites at locations such as principal fire departments and operations facilities. These sites connect to other Mat-Su departmental locations such as maintenance and animal care. In addition, there are 18 remote locations for the borough’s on-call responders, including emergency medical technicians and firefighters, and 17 landfill, recreational, and library sites.

All server computers are Dell PowerEdge 2850 running Windows Server 2003. Two server computers running Exchange Server 2003 contain 489 user mailboxes, one of which is dedicated to users at the remote emergency sites. Providing mailbox access over the Internet, a third server is used to host Microsoft Office Outlook® Web Access, a component of Exchange Server that provides Web-based access to messaging information.

Benefits

As a result of the migration, Matanuska-Susitna Borough has experienced significant cost savings due to the lower licensing fees for the Microsoft software, the reduction in IT labor required to support the network, and a significant reduction in travel expenses because Blackley’s group now can manage server computers and workstations from the primary site location. “We don’t practice deficit spending,” says Blackley. “We don’t have the option of adding head count to support our systems. Standardizing on Microsoft software has helped us become

significantly more efficient in our processes with the same head count as before.”

Payback on Investment in One Year

Blackley projects that it will take Mat-Su Borough approximately one year to recover its investment in the new solution. The quick return is a result of two factors, says Blackley: lower initial costs of the Microsoft licenses, which were approximately U.S.\$30,000 less than renewal of the Novell licenses, and lower annual costs. The perpetual nature of the Microsoft licenses, compared with the recurring annual costs of the Novell solution, contribute to the lower annual costs. But of more significance, says Blackley, is the fact that IT labor costs will be significantly lower because the new system requires less support and maintenance.

Travel Expenses Reduced Dramatically

With more than 25 remote sites, Mat-Su IT staff used to spend a great deal of time and money traversing a formidable Alaskan environment to support remote sites. “It may be at least a two-hour or three-hour drive to another site. Last week we had a foot of snow, and it was 13 degrees below zero. Road conditions can be risky, we have only six hours of daylight, and last year inhabitants of the borough hit more than 400 moose on the highways,” says Blackley. “In the past, we were sometimes forced to send people out to make a shortcut on a user’s desktop to a program. The ability to manage our network remotely and uniformly across the organization has been the biggest benefit in this unique environment.”

With Group Policy and the Active Directory service infrastructure in Windows Server 2003, the Mat-Su IT staff can automate management of users and computers on the network, including managing user access and permissions for Exchange Server and Outlook Web Access. Using Remote Desktop for Administration, a feature of Windows Server

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2003 that allows server administrators to remotely configure, deploy, and redeploy server roles for any network server, the IT staff can remotely manage server resources, print and file services, user settings, and line-of-business applications across the network as the needs of the borough change or as employees are added to or removed from the network.

Cost Savings of More than 60 Percent

Before the migration, it took one staff member from two to five days per month to maintain synchronization between NDS and Active Directory, and troubleshoot incompatibility issues, says Blackley. With a single directory service, this maintenance time has been reduced to zero.

“Consolidating to Active Directory has vastly simplified our network,” he says. “We manage our system through a central console, and maintenance of competing directory services is no longer an issue.”

Blackley estimates that the reduction in licensing costs and IT labor expenses just three months after the migration saved the borough more than 60 percent compared with what it would have cost to renew the Novell licenses and continue to maintain and support the Novell infrastructure.

IT Operating Efficiency Improved, Services Enhanced

With the migration to Windows Server System products, Blackley believes his staff can provide better services to the Mat-Su community, both within the employee user base and, eventually, to the community as a whole.

Compatibility issues between the Novell-based infrastructure and the borough’s LOB and productivity applications required Blackley’s IT group to frequently create workarounds that often resulted in reduced functionality of a certain application. The

better compatibility between the LOB applications and Windows Server System products, and the reliability of the new system’s remote administrative features, has brought about better results and improved efficiency for Blackley’s staff and the borough’s employees.

In addition, Blackley believes that Mat-Su employees are beginning to experience improvements in efficiency due to the integration of the Microsoft Office Outlook 2003 messaging and collaboration client with other Microsoft Office productivity programs in use.

Blackley looks forward to providing the community with self-service, Web-based applications such as the ability to access government records at will, access GIS information, pull parcel data, and pay bills online. “With Novell, we were mostly reactive—fixing problems,” he says. “Cost savings and efficiency gains from the Microsoft-based solution will allow us to be proactive, providing new and better services in the future.”

For More Information

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For more information about Arctic Information Technology products and services, call (907) 646-7300 or visit the Web site at: www.arcticit.com

For more information about Quest Software products and services, call (949) 754-8000 or visit the Web site at: www.quest.com

For more information about Matanuska-Susitna Borough, call (907) 745-4801 or visit the Web site at: www.matsugov.us

Microsoft Windows Server System

Microsoft Windows Server System is a line of integrated and manageable server software designed to reduce the complexity and cost of IT. Windows Server System enables you to spend less time and budget on managing your systems so that you can focus your resources on other priorities for you and your business.

For more information about Windows Server System, go to: www.microsoft.com/windowsserversystem

Software and Services

- Microsoft Windows Server System
 - Microsoft Exchange Server 2003
 - Microsoft Windows Server 2003 Enterprise Edition
- Microsoft Office
 - Microsoft Office Outlook 2003

Technologies

- Active Directory
- Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access
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Hardware

- Dell PowerEdge 2850 server computers

Partners

- Arctic Information Technology
- Quest Software

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Document published April 2006

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