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AFTER COMPARING BACKUP SOLUTIONS, INTERNATIONAL STEEL PROCESSOR SELECTS APPASSURE FOR DIRECT EXPORT TO VMWARE AND DISASTER RECOVERY REPLICATION

Executive Summary

Note: although this international steel processing company has a strict policy against giving product testimonials, they willingly agreed to share their story, because of their great experience with AppAssure, under the pseudonym, "ISPC."

ISPC's small IT staff had no centralized monitoring for backups and disaster recovery, and tape backups became unreliable for mission critical data. ISPC needed a solution that not only provided the granular data and system backups, but also tested and verified that their backups were able to be recovered, along with the option of virtual recovery.

ISPC

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>
> — A.H. Senior Network Administrator, ISPC

Business Challenges

With manufacturing plants in various locations in North America, the ISPC Group is a heavy hitter in the international steel processing industry. Clients of ISPC include automotive, electrical, office furniture, and other blue-chip businesses that need sheet steel, flat-bar, tubing for truck landing gear, pipes and tubing for electrical, as well as customer-owned material processing. The company is part and parcel of a larger diverse holding which includes a manufacturing group and a distribution group as well.

Despite its extensive 23 operating units, the IT department that makes sure the production data and the technological systems infrastructure is solid and dependable, is a two-man shop. "Our main production stuff is still being run on old UNIX," says A.H., Senior Network Administrator at ISPC, "but we're taking it to Linux soon. The manufacturing facility, which makes buckets, nail guns, is using SyteLine, so we've got diverse architecture here." ISPC's main data center is located in Canada with 15 servers running Blackberry Enterprise, MS Exchange, Active Directory servers, file servers, Internet, and a few other servers running additional applications. ISPC's remote locations are connected by LAN-to-LAN VPN, and everything used to be minimally protected with legacy products such as Windows NTBackup, SyncBackSE, as well as Symantec and ArcServe.

"Managing and monitoring the activity of NTBackup requires logging on to each server in turn, to verify the status of the backups," says A.H. "There is no centralized management capability and no ability to send notifications. We were doing tape backups nightly but no one really monitored it, and we were working on a fingers-crossed type scenario. We knew that we needed a different way to back up, and I wanted to find a backup solution that would also offer virtual recovery."

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ISPC's IT team found that if data was lost or deleted several days ago, it could easily take someone up to four hours to find the tape, data, and restore it—IF the backup was good. Not only that, but because their products did not have sophisticated deduplication and compression, they weren't able to back up all their data and their systems regularly. "We had Exchange set for nightly backup, but some servers had to be scheduled to run only on a weekly basis with no more than one month's copies saved for each server at a time," explains A.H. With a limited IT staff, it was too easy to overlook the necessity of checking logs regularly, and the team knew that in the event of a catastrophic failure of one of the servers, the only way to recover would be a complete re-install.

It was time to go in a completely different direction.

Testing Products

The ISPC IT team set about a rigorous task of comparing solutions that would give them everything they needed: dependable backup, application-aware monitoring, replication for a true disaster recovery plan, as well as comprehensive storage space savings—all within a reasonable price and with an ease of use. Here are some of the products they tried and decided against:

Symantec Backup Exec System Recovery

*   Rejected due to the exceedingly complicated interface

*   Also the team was only able to get it installed on one of their test servers and the uninstall left traces that had to be removed manually

*   Backup Exec 2010 was too complicated in testing it as a solution

CA ArcServe D2D

*   Far too expensive for ISPC, especially considering that replication was not included in the base license but had to be separately purchased

*   Multi-site replication would have cost 3x the price of AppAssure

StorageCraft Shadow Protect

*   A true contender for the team, and A.H. was close to recommending as the solution to be adopted by ISPC, except that Shadow Protect had direct support only for Sun Microsystems' Virtual Box, not VMware.

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> — A.H. Senior Network Administrator, ISPC

The Solution

Having worked with all the legacy backup products for years, A.H. has seen the issues that each one has and the evolution of the solutions—which is why when he found AppAssure, he was extremely surprised… and very happy.

"I was close to recommending StorageCraft," he admits, "but when I found out that AppAssure was getting high marks from other people, I set up a demo and we were really impressed. We set up a test site with a core server and multiple little servers, a VM, and a cross domain as well to test that. We made it a bit of a challenge, and took a system image using Acronis to start with, then installed solutions to test for backup and restore. AppAssure allowed us to have direct export to VMware, while Shadow Protect had direct support only for Virtual Box and I didn't want to go to a Virtual Box platform I didn't know. Not only that, but, I really like AppAssure's interface. There's only one place to look for the information I need—it's all there in front of me."

The Results

Choosing AppAssure as ISPC's enterprise data recovery and server backup solution has meant that the IT team now gets all the features they've been looking for in one, well-priced, easy-to-install, state-of-the-art solution.

"In IT, we always need two things," notes A.H. "We need reliable backup and we need quick recovery. Backup gets your data back. Recovery gets your system back. With AppAssure, we get all this, for our Exchange, for our file servers, for SQL, and for both physical and virtual machines."

ISPC's key IT challenges are solved with AppAssure's award-winning backup and replication software:

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Rapid Server Recovery: "We had a SQL server for time clocks that wasn't live yet, and I came in one weekend and rebooted it. It didn't reboot (no boot device found). So I went to AppAssure and recovered it quickly—I didn't have to take several days to start it all over again. I am now very confident that in the event that one of the servers crashes, it can be restored completely within a very short time frame."

Rapid Data Restore: "Lost or damaged data can be very easily retrieved even to a very recent point in time. We had a crucial file that was actually from a desktop PC, and was a very large Excel spreadsheet. After an employee attempted to email the data, it disappeared from the file. I was able to log on to the AppAssure server and retrieve a copy that had been made just a short time earlier. Our staff said that the software had just paid for itself with that one single retrieval."

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Virtualization: "Currently in one location we have an ESX server running multiple virtual machines which are backed up using AppAssure. The site with the ESX server backs up the virtual machines on that server and two critical desktops. These are then replicated to the main core server in our data centre. We plan to use an ESXi 5.0 server to provide an emergency recovery location in case of a crashed server."

Storage Space Savings: "The estimated daily savings is approximately 70GB right now. We are keeping several months of snapshots for most servers, weekly snapshots for as much as five weeks, and daily snapshots for 7-15 days, and the total amount of storage consumed is almost exactly the same as the total amount being protected."

Data Retention: "Setting our own snapshots and the retention of data forever, means that we are now able to retrieve lost or corrupt data even weeks after the loss or corruption."

Superior GUI with Easy Verifiability: "Since everything is centralized on a single server, the status of all jobs can be verified essentially, as they say, 'at a glance'. You have to have a good backup and you have to know whether you have a good backup or not. AppAssure tells us what we're dealing with."

"All of this would have been impossible with the old NTBackup scenario," says A.H. "It's like night and day. Or should I say: Previous Solution = Chalk. AppAssure = Cheese. I know which one I prefer!"