



HIGH-AVAILABILITY



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Success Story



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Outsourcing company Serco Solutions, formerly ITNET, depends utterly on its ability to provide customer service because, in the end, that's all it does. The Birmingham based company has built a £100 million business running other people's IT facilities and its long list of clients includes such big names as the Post Office, Credit Lyonnaise and London Underground.

The Serco Solutions help desk is a 24 hour a day, 365 day a year operation tasked with providing a speedy resolution to any problem, query or service request from the company's clients. It could be something as mundane as an end-user's inability to print a document or something as serious as a failed mainframe or network.

In either case, the process is the same: calls come in to an automatic call distribution (ACD) system that routes them automatically to the appropriate team, and details logged on a Remedy event-management system.

The Remedy system is the nerve centre of the help desk operation. It includes details of who called, who logged the call, the nature of the problem, the team assigned to deal with it, and so on. Remedy, which sits on top of Serco Solutions's Oracle customer services database also gives staff access to the service-level agreements (SLAs) for each client, allowing support tasks to be prioritised and scheduled accordingly. The Remedy system tracks each incident from the first call to the final resolution and produces the reports on which Serco Solutions and its clients depend to measure the effectiveness of the service.

"Day to day management of the support operation depends on Remedy. We couldn't run without it," says Adrian Watson, Serco Solutions's technical services manager. "If Remedy failed we would simply have to equip the fix teams with a pad of paper and a pencil and hope for the best, and that's no way to provide customer support," he says.

The Remedy system was installed in 1999 after the failure of one of Serco Solutions's servers resulted in an outage lasting seven hours. At that time, the company had already taken a decision to replace the mainframe running its existing customer-service applications.

"The mainframe lacked the flexibility we needed," Watson says.

With the memory of the earlier system failure still fresh, Serco Solutions decided to install the Oracle and Remedy software on a more powerful platform, replacing a single Unix server with a pair of machines under the control of RSF-1 from High-Availability.Com.

RSF-1 is a continuous computing platform designed for environments in which failure would not simply be inconvenient but potentially catastrophic. The software is used by ambulance services, for instance, to keep emergency call centres running.

The Unix cluster comprises primary and secondary servers that use a single IP address. RSF-1 ensures that the data and applications on the secondary server exactly mirror the primary machine. Using a "heart beat" technique, the second server constantly polls the first to check that it is still online. If, for any reason, the service disappears, the second node restarts, assumes the identity of the first, loads all the relevant disks from a local array, and the service resumes. This sequence of events takes no more than a couple of minutes, at worst.



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Adrian Watson



RSF-1 monitors not just the status of the hardware and the network, but the applications themselves, so that if Oracle or Remydy were to fall over, these too could be rapidly restored.

Watson says that since early 2000, when RSF-1 was installed, system outages have been eliminated. There were also benefits Serco Solutions didn’t anticipate. “In the past, if we wanted to perform an operating system upgrade or check a piece of malfunctioning hardware, we would need to take the system off-line during a quiet period. That could mean a few hours of downtime and there was always the worry that the box wouldn’t come back up when it was re-booted. Now our engineers can simplify fail-over the system requiring attention and bring it back on-line straight away when the work has been done.”

A wider benefit is that RSF-1 helps Serco Solutions deliver the level of service its increasingly demanding customers expect. “Many of our biggest clients are themselves developing high-availability IT solutions for their customers. We can’t expect to win bids with these companies without taking a high-availability approach to our own services,” Watson says.

He adds: “I wouldn’t say that RSF-1 makes our lives easier. But it does stop them from getting harder.”

