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Philipp Huber, COO XCalibre

XCalibre Delivers More Flexible and Scalable Web Hosting Services with BIG-IP® LTM



Industry:

Utility Computing and Managed Hosting Services Provider

Challenges:

- Deliver a new, more flexible, and highly scalable service
- Ensure high application availability
- Increase customer satisfaction and loyalty to minimise churn

Solution

- BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager 3400

Benefits:

- Launched the UK’s first Utility Computing service
- Provisioning time cut from hours or days to less than one minute
- On-demand service with massively improved flexibility and scalability
- Service high availability without the typical costs associated with it
- Achieved cost efficiencies from reduced power consumption

Overview

XCalibre Communications Ltd. has been delivering hosting solutions to the home, business, and reseller markets since 1997. It offers a full range of hosting services and has a strong commitment to delivering superior customer service. As a result, its customer loyalty is generally well above average for its industry. It has a low churn rate and, when it acquires new customers, this usually results in direct business growth.

XCalibre understood that many of its customers needed a more flexible and scalable hosting service to help them manage unexpected peaks in traffic. It therefore decided to launch an innovative new hosting service and selected F5 solutions as a key part of its new infrastructure.

Challenges

In the hosted IT services market, customers are cost-conscious and, consequently, not typically very loyal. “Just as people will switch mobile phone providers at the first sight of a special offer, hosting customers are influenced by price and service,” explains Philipp Huber, COO of XCalibre. “If customers are not happy, they can easily switch to another provider.”

Quality of service is therefore an important issue in this market, and hosting providers need to strive to deliver high levels of application availability at all times. However, if a customer has a dedicated service and that particular server fails, it can take a couple of hours to restore hardware and software configuration. Similarly, if a customer leases capacity on a shared server and experiences an unexpected peak in network activity, all the other companies sharing the same server will experience degradation in performance.

These challenges are common to all companies in the hosted service provider market – not just XCalibre – but with its strong commitment to delivering excellent customer service, XCalibre wanted to be one of the first companies to overcome them. The company decided to invest in developing an infrastructure that would be infinitely more scalable and highly reliable, while still offering good value for the money.

With these goals in mind, XCalibre launched project “Valhalla” to develop and launch a new Utility Computing platform. Utility Computing is a term coined by industry analysts and refers to the ability of service providers to offer customers computing resources on-demand on a pay-as-you-go cost model. At the time, the concept was much discussed in the industry, but no UK or European service providers had yet made a decisive move in this direction. XCalibre wanted to be the first.

Solution

To enable Valhalla to deliver its new, more scalable service for customers, XCalibre needed to acquire a load balancing solution. XCalibre needed a product that could detect various load levels automatically and then react appropriately and rapidly. In particular, it wanted a load balancer that wasn’t just capable of operating at Layers 2 and 3, but at Layer 7. This was because the company wanted to be able to do complete packet inspection and reconfigure the solution quickly in real time.

Initially, the company approached five different suppliers. It carried out a series of equipment tests and established that F5 offered the most suitable solution. Huber recalls: “F5 was extremely flexible and provided us with immediate help during the pre-sales process if we had any queries.”



In addition, XCalibre was very impressed by the scale and breadth of F5's user community, DevCentral. "We saw enormous value from becoming a part of this community and being able to learn from the hands-on experiences of other companies in different industries," says Huber.

However, in the end, it was not the people at F5 or the user community that convinced XCalibre – it was the product itself. "The solution is blazing-fast and the iRules script language is extremely powerful," says Huber. "It also provides built-in mechanisms to provide protection against malicious denial-of-service (DoS) attacks, which can have a disastrous impact on all companies that share a networking infrastructure."

The company deployed two BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) 3400s. Through use of these solutions, the company has been able to establish a highly available and scalable infrastructure. If one web server fails or experiences a peak in demand, BIG-IP LTM automatically switches traffic to another server with available capacity. In this way, XCalibre is able to guarantee high levels of application availability and scalability for customers.

"F5 had a clear understanding of the infrastructure we wanted to create," says Huber. "F5 solutions are a major component in our architecture, enabling us to deliver flexibility and scalability to our customers. Many of the benefits that we can pass on to customers wouldn't be possible without F5 products."

Benefits

Named FlexiScale, XCalibre's new service has been well received and offers a superior level of functionality. "FlexiScale enables us to offer customers a totally new way of outsourcing their computing requirements," says Huber. "Customers only pay for what they actually use, but they can easily scale up and scale down their requirements whenever they need to. We are the first company in the UK to offer a service of this type."

"We are in discussion with a large number of UK and US Web 2.0 software providers and they are extremely excited about our service," says Huber. "Existing dedicated servers do not support a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) business model very well. Our Utility billing, the scalability and the new levels of availability fully underpin a SaaS business model. Some vendors have already started to integrate their service with FlexiScale at API level. By doing this, the cost savings and many other benefits are directly passed on to their customers."

As the new service takes off, XCalibre expects to be able to make better use of its own infrastructure. By implementing FlexiScale internally, it hopes to be able to reduce the number of servers, reduce its power consumption, and use its equipment more intelligently to reduce costs and increase revenues. "I anticipate that we will save at least 20% from reduced electricity costs alone," says Huber.

With F5's solutions, XCalibre's entire "virtualisation" infrastructure is much easier to maintain. IT personnel can make hardware swaps, memory upgrades and configuration changes without having to disrupt customer services. "We no longer have to perform maintenance at midnight so as to minimise the impact on our customers," explains Huber. "We can take systems down whenever we need to during normal office hours, which reduces overtime costs and means that my team gets more sleep! It also means that we can better meet the needs of global companies that receive network traffic from different parts of the world, around the clock."

He concludes: "F5 solutions are a clear enabler. They have enabled us to bring a brand-new service to the market and offer customers predictably high performance in a more economical and flexible package. With F5, our new FlexiScale product removes the traditional challenges of the hosted environment."



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