Williams & Fudge Transforms Financial Services for Higher Education with Nutanix

Accounts receivable management firm streamlines operations and scales fast for new remote work challenges with unified platform

BUSINESS BENEFITS

Williams & Fudge, Inc. is a family-owned business that has been helping colleges and universities recover debt since 1986. A vital part of the U.S. economy, the company relies on its IT infrastructure to support the collection software and databases its employees need to stay productive. When the firm found that its complex hardware-based infrastructure could not provide the business agility it needed, Williams & Fudge moved its business applications to a Nutanix hyperconverged infrastructure (HCI). Secure and simple to manage, the Nutanix solution helps the firm stay in compliance with data privacy and payment regulations, protect students' personal information, and respond to change faster. The solution scales easily and minimizes management burdens on the IT team, providing the agility the company needed to support work-from-home initiatives when the COVID-19 health crisis emerged.

> "As a small business with a small IT team, I serve as architect, engineer, and support for our datacenter technology, in addition to being team leader. Nutanix drastically reduces time spent on tangible technology, to allow for more innovative projects, staff development, and business transformation."
>
> – Phillip Reynolds, Vice President of Information Technology, Williams & Fudge

INDUSTRY
Financial Services

BENEFITS
- Hyperconverged infrastructure enables Williams & Fudge to remove 33 percent of its points of management, freeing IT to focus on innovation
- Core application performance has improved by 43 percent, to help staff work more efficiently
- Scalable solution enabled firm to support 320 remote employees in response to COVID-19 crisis

SOLUTION
- Nutanix Enterprise Cloud OS
- Nutanix Prism management software
- Acropolis AHV hypervisor

APPLICATIONS
- FICO Debt Manager
- Microsoft SharePoint
- VMware Horizon virtual desktops
- Microsoft SQL Servers/Reporting Services

CHALLENGES

Each year, Williams & Fudge returns millions of dollars of defaulted student loans back to their higher education clients. The organization is dedicated to delivering exceptional customer service, respecting consumers, and maintaining high ethical conduct. More than 320 employees depend on the firm's network and applications for payment and communication on a daily basis, and Williams & Fudge is relentlessly focused on improvement. "Our digital transformation is just beginning," said Phillip Reynolds, Vice President of IT, Williams & Fudge. "We take our mission to serve our clients and consumers very seriously. If we can use fast systems to make our people more efficient, ensure that our systems are highly available and compliant, and recover in the event of a disaster, that's ultimately a huge benefit to the higher education community."

As the firm's existing environment began to show its age, Reynolds decided it was time to take stock of the complex environment and identify areas that could improve. "I looked at every system in our datacenter and identified all points of management, including compliance management.," said Reynolds. "Due to regulations for handling sensitive consumer data and payment information, managing the compliance posture of each system against various standards is an endless task. A change to security standards, or a new widespread vulnerability, requires modifying or upgrading each management point. It could take six to nine months to update our previous infrastructure for one setting change, like the retirement of TLSv1.0."

SOLUTION

After considering several different solutions and architectures, Reynolds decided to migrate the Williams & Fudge workloads, databases, and additional infrastructure to Nutanix Enterprise Cloud with the AHV Acropolis hypervisor. "We have migrated about 100 servers running FICO Debt Manager and other collection software, as well as our reporting servers and SQL servers that support them," said Reynolds. "Our supporting internal infrastructure, including Microsoft SharePoint and Active Directory, are also on Nutanix."

Nutanix lets IT take advantage of simpler management by consolidating separate devices under one unified view. "Nutanix is built for compliance, and the ability to perform patches and upgrades with one click is much easier than having to upgrade individual devices," said Reynolds.

To maintain business continuity, Reynolds and his team deployed the Nutanix native disaster recovery capabilities. "Our previous DR system required a lot of management overhead and multiple manual configuration steps. Leap was extremely simple to set up and use," said Reynolds. "We can simply define our SLAs, set up categories, place them on the VMs, and it does the rest. It's an effortless approach to DR."

CUSTOMER OUTCOME

Migrating from its hardware-based environment has enabled Williams & Fudge to reduce its points of management by more than 30 percent, to free up staff for other projects instead of performing daily troubleshooting and engineering tasks. "After identifying the future time saved with Nutanix, I tangibly presented the concept to executives through the simple eyes of a child. I used 153 towers of building blocks to represent the different management points in the datacenter, with each block in each tower representing things like passwords, logging, or security. I then wiped about a third of them off the table to represent the consolidation in management touch points," said Reynolds.

Security and compliance are also top priorities, and one-click security and improved visibility have enabled the company to keep pace with fast-changing requirements. "Small IT teams wear many hats, with none more important than protecting data – and we have more than I want to disclose," said Reynolds. "Since implementing Nutanix over a year ago, our monthly vulnerability scans have returned no findings against the Nutanix software or hardware platforms."

I never thought that Nutanix would save us time in the security maintenance area as well, or I would have thrown more 'toy blocks' off the table last year! Nutanix is designed to be secure straight out of the box, unlike our previous infrastructure that required countless hours of researching, testing, and implementing security patches multiple times a year."

The move to an HCI environment has also helped Williams & Fudge improve performance of its applications, providing a better experience for both employees and end customers. "Migrating our SQL servers from our legacy environment to Nutanix has enabled us to decrease query times by 43 percent," said Reynolds. "Immediately after migrating our core application database from our legacy infrastructure to AHV on Nutanix, several staff members actually called IT to ask why the application was faster, instead of making the usual complaint call!"

Scalability and agility to respond to a healthcare crisis

The scalability and flexibility of Nutanix solution came to the forefront when Reynolds and his team were asked to prepare the company's call center for remote work, as the COVID-19 pandemic escalated. The IT team spent five days building communication and collaboration tools, adding employees to a multifactor authentication system, and deployed a new secure extranet website with remote connection information, and an external help desk for call center employees who had issues.

"We were able to focus on improving the work from home experience, not throwing something together at the last minute," said Reynolds. "Three weeks after providing the option, over 90% of our staff began working from home. Because of Nutanix's solid and trusted infrastructure, in addition to the speed of hyperconverged all flash, our team of four was able to support over 300 employees who had never worked remotely. Our employees are our most valued asset, so we focused on them first. As schools and day cares were closing, they were able to quickly shift to working from home—while continuing to earn a paycheck. We are able to focus on what matters."

NEXT STEPS

Williams & Fudge is preparing to deploy Nutanix Flow to further simplify its network and policy management for applications and automate common operations. The new HCI has done more than simply enable the organization to meet its compliance needs and streamline operations. The extensible, scalable solution actually opened up staff and resources to support future innovation. "Small businesses are next to make the change in focus for IT teams, from help desk fixers to business value deliverers," said Reynolds. "By basically forgetting that we even have a datacenter to manage, Nutanix has allowed us to focus on company-wide digital transformation. The ability to enable the IT team to focus on delivering business value instead of keeping the lights on, is the game-changer small businesses need to embrace today."