

CASE STUDY: Allied North America Insurance Brokers

SUMMARY

Industry

- Finance (Insurance)

Challenges

- Remove servers from remote offices
- Speed the rollout of new branch offices

Solution

- Riverbed Steelhead appliances

Benefits

- 80 to 95% reduction in bandwidth consumption
- Simplified management and maintenance of remote office infrastructure
- Facilitated rollout of new, custom-built document management system
- Simplified, reliable, scalable solution

Steelhead™ Appliances Reduce Bandwidth Consumption while Eliminating File and Exchange Servers from Branch Offices

Allied North America (www.alliedna.com) is a fast-growing specialty insurance broker focused on providing coverage for major construction projects throughout North America. Headquartered in Jericho, New York, Allied has 14 offices throughout the U.S.

Background

Allied's rapid growth has created a host of problems. According to CIO Geoffrey Moon, "We tend to add offices very quickly through acquisition. We can go from not having an office on Friday to having a fully-functional broker on Monday."

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Adding more offices means more complexity. Allied's solution had been to add local file servers and mail servers in each new office, rapidly increasing the administrative burden for IT. In addition, Allied has Exchange servers in seven of their remote offices.

Another issue is that many of the Allied offices are in full-service shared spaces, with IT infrastructure shared by other tenants in the building. In many cases 10 or 20 tenants share a single TI, making it extremely difficult to roll out applications.

Geoff noted "Trying to open a file from a shared file server in our data center was an extremely painful experience. In many cases it just wasn't workable."

Allied has approximately two million documents, mostly PDFs, that need to be available to local branches. A typical branch may have 100,000 documents that need to be "on tap" for local use.

The Serverless Office Challenge

Allied's long-term strategy is to get rid of as many servers as possible and move toward a centralized scanning center with high-performance access to centralized documents.

"My objective is to get to a point where new offices don't have any servers at all," said Geoff. "Everyone knows the story when it comes to remote servers – tape-based backup, chasing people down to swap tapes, painful recoveries, and so forth. If we could get to the point where there are no servers in branches at all, that would be optimal."

Adding bandwidth wasn't really an option, primarily due to the shared office situations and Geoff's instinct that it wasn't a long-term solution. Instead, he looked at the emerging market for WAN optimization including Peribit, Cisco (Actona) and other products.

"Then in 2004 we ran into Riverbed at a conference, and I really liked what I saw," Geoff recalled. "The application aspect of it intrigued me, and I added Steelhead equipment to the list of products to test."

Solution: Steelhead Appliances

By deploying Steelhead appliances in offices using centralized servers, Allied is able to immediately reduce bandwidth consumption by 80% to 95% – equal to an increase in bandwidth of 5x to 20x.

Geoff can also take advantage of Riverbed's ability to pre-populate the Steelhead

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OVERVIEW

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When Allied removed file and Exchange servers from most of their branch offices, they were able to eliminate a whole range of daily and weekly work required to back them up, apply the latest patches from Microsoft, and all the other IT administration tasks that are normally required.

Steelhead appliances enable a simpler and more robust backup process, and a faster recovery process in the event a server goes down.

appliances. “By pre-positioning key content such as in-process insurance claims,” he said, “the response time for our brokers in the remote offices will be as if they still had their local servers.”

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Allied discovered that the Steelhead appliances facilitate their rollout of a new custom-built document management system. “Our developers have been developing this application for some time” said Geoff. “Until we purchased Steelhead appliances, they were writing document caching code into the document management product. Now, because Steelhead appliances eliminate the need for caching altogether, we are abandoning that approach.”

Geoff is also delighted with the operational efficiencies that come “for free” with his plans for serverless offices. He explained, “Just by eliminating file servers and Exchange servers from most of our branch offices, we get rid of a whole range of daily and weekly work required to back them up, apply the latest patches from Microsoft, and all the other IT administration tasks that are normally required. I end up with a simpler and more robust backup process, and a faster recovery process in the event a server does go down.”

Benefits

Faced with the choice of putting either more servers or a Steelhead appliance in each office, Geoff decided that “from this point forward, Steelhead appliances are on the list of standard equipment that goes into every Allied branch.”

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Allied is pleased with Steelhead equipment’s very high ROI and payback in well under a year, yet Geoff said, “I don’t even look at it that way. It’s more important to have simplicity, reliability and scalability, and Riverbed gives me that.”

About Riverbed

Riverbed Technology is the pioneer in wide area data services (WDS), a fast-growing product category that solves the problems of high latency and limited bandwidth that plague a wide variety of applications over distributed networks. Riverbed’s Steelhead appliances provide the highest level of WAN performance at a lower cost, reducing WAN traffic by up to 95% and accelerating applications by up to 100 times.

By providing optimizations that are orders of magnitude greater than what users experience today, Riverbed is changing the way people work – and enabling, for the first time, a truly distributed workforce. InfoWorld named Steelhead a “Product of the Year” for 2005 as the “Best WAN Accelerator.” Steelhead appliances are available worldwide directly from Riverbed and through global partners, including HP.