

Nonprofit Saves 20 Percent in Data Center Costs with Cloud Solution



aidmatrix[®]
Right Aid. Right People. Right Time.™

Avanade and Accenture expertise reduces migration costs

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Results Realized

From Accenture and Microsoft

Business Situation

The Aidmatrix Foundation has developed a global reputation for helping business, nonprofit, and government partners make a difference in the lives of people around the world. When disaster strikes, organizations in charge of providing humanitarian relief—food, clothes, medical supplies—turn to Aidmatrix for its web-based, supply-chain technology. The company's solutions cover procurement, warehousing, donation management, transportation, and consulting and are built from the ground up with one goal in mind: to help disaster response organizations deliver aid as quickly and cost-effectively as possible.

Natural and human-caused disasters follow no agenda, so Aidmatrix must be ready at all times to quickly deliver its solutions to partners anywhere in the world. Unlike typical businesses, demand for the nonprofit's products follows unpredictable spikes interspersed with periods of relative inactivity. During and immediately following a crisis, demand can reach up to 1,000 times the normal rate. Aidmatrix stays prepared by hosting its solutions in three data centers across the United States and one in England.

"We have to maintain a certain level of assets at these data centers to be prepared for any eventuality," says Michael Ross, Vice President for Delivery at Aidmatrix. "Until recently, outsourcing the management of the physical servers at the data center was an ongoing expense. We paid up front for space and physical infrastructure that we didn't use all the time. We also paid for server maintenance and for updating our software. We would have preferred to allocate our IT resources toward enhancing our solutions."

If a crisis occurred where Aidmatrix had no preexisting infrastructure, the company used to go through a long and expensive process of identifying a

location to host servers and run its software to help local aid delivery.

"For new locations, we would have to set up our standard administrative processes to run our software," says Ross. "Depending on where the data center is located, there are different levels of tooling and support services available. It took us four weeks to get up and running for a supply-chain implementation in the United Kingdom."

The ability to quickly deploy new technologies and services is also important for the company's growth. Until seven years ago, Aidmatrix was predominantly a U.S.-based organization. "Lately, the majority of our growth has been international, so the need to locate technology assets across the world has become more important," says Ross. "The closer we can place our servers to where they are needed, the better our solutions perform."

Aidmatrix needed a more scalable, cost-effective platform to deliver its solutions and services around the world at a moment's notice. However, as long as the company's operations were inextricably linked to setting up and tearing down physical infrastructures at local data centers, it was difficult to achieve the level of responsive, cost-effective service to which it aspired.

"We began to think about the benefits of migrating our solutions to a cloud-based environment to minimize our infrastructure requirements and be more resilient to the costs of the unpredictable nature of our business," says Ross. "However, cloud-based technologies are new and rapidly evolving, and we needed a partner we could trust to help us make the transition."

Business Technology

The Aidmatrix Foundation evaluated several cloud services from different

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vendors, including Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud. The company decided to subscribe to Windows Azure, a Microsoft cloud solution that provides a Windows-based environment for developing and running applications and storing data on servers in Microsoft data centers around the world.

“Windows Azure was the most cost-effective platform-as-a-service offering we found. It also helped that most of our solutions are built using the Microsoft .NET Framework,” says Ross. “Microsoft recommended Avanade as a partner of choice to help transition our solutions to the Windows Azure environment. We have a long history with Accenture, Avanade’s parent company, and knew the quality of Avanade’s work, so it was an easy decision.”

The project began in late 2010, with a six-member team of Accenture and Avanade professionals working alongside a team of a dozen people from Aidmatrix. “The Accenture and Avanade team clearly understood our business needs,” says Ross. “The team guided us through an analysis of the project and then helped to prioritize which solutions to migrate and when.”

Built Additional Functionality

An example of how Avanade and Accenture added value to the engagement occurred early in the project when the team built a custom solution called the Operations Framework to help Aidmatrix monitor specific components of its solutions while running in the Windows Azure environment. The framework includes scheduling database backups and archiving data to an on-premises file system.

“We added this project into the statement of work, and the team simply switched gears and got it done,” says Ross. “The framework is running great, and we are using it to monitor larger solutions in Windows Azure that have

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more stringent service level agreements with our customers.”

Reduced Migration Costs

During the engagement, Aidmatrix benefitted from Avanade and Accenture’s close partnership with Microsoft, which helped to reduce migration costs. “The relationship between Accenture, Avanade, and Microsoft helped save us a lot of unnecessary development,” says Ross. “We were beginning work on the Online Warehouse Plus module, which is designed to support offline functionality, when the Accenture and Avanade team suggested that we put the project on hold. They knew that, in a few months, Microsoft would be releasing the functionality that we were building. That level of technological expertise and knowledge into a rapidly evolving technology was impressive, and it saved us a big chunk of work.”

“When it came time to migrate the Virtual Aid Drive solution, it included components written in Adobe ColdFusion, which is a difficult language to port directly to the Windows Azure environment. To handle this unforeseen circumstance, Aidmatrix brought in a third-party vendor, New Atlanta Communications. Avanade and Accenture worked closely with this company, taking advantage of its product, BlueDragon, to enable ColdFusion to run on Windows Azure. “We were impressed at how the team rose to the occasion, working with BlueDragon to identify the changes that had to be made and then testing the code when it came back,” says Ross. “This saved us a substantial amount of time and money by not having to rewrite the ColdFusion code.”

Since May 2011, Aidmatrix has been migrating additional solutions to the Windows Azure environment. “Even though we have officially transitioned off the project, the Accenture and Avanade team leads have been great in helping with some technical questions we’ve

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had,” says Ross. “Their commitment to the success of the engagement went beyond our expectations.”

As part of the project, Aidmatrix is taking advantage of the Windows Azure content delivery network to have components of its solutions available in multiple data centers around the world at all times. The solution migrations began in January 2011. The first, Aidmatrix Network Online Warehouse, is used to manage the inventory of humanitarian relief warehouses and provides end-to-end inventory management of donated and purchased goods. Next, Aidmatrix Virtual Aid Drive is an online humanitarian fundraising campaign that enables quick creation of new donation campaigns. Finally, the Aidmatrix In-Kind Donations module is an online tool that is used by large organizations, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the United States. This solution helps organizations manage in-kind donations. All three solutions were migrated on time and on budget by May 2011.

“Throughout the process, we were impressed by the level of expertise that Avanade and Accenture had with Windows Azure technologies,” says Ross. “The team demonstrated a unique ability to tie in with our agile development methodology and work as one with our team, which is high praise. The team lead was extremely flexible in working with our globally dispersed stakeholders, regularly meeting different time zones and scheduling requirements in a way that matched our agile cycle, our management tools, and our processes. It made for a very smooth, well-executed engagement.”

For each solution, the Accenture and Avanade team and Aidmatrix discussed the scope and goals for the migration to the Windows Azure environment. Then, the team took advantage of its offshore development arms in the Philippines and India to quickly re-architect the

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solution, returning it to Aidmatrix ready to go.

Results

The Windows Azure migration project heralded a new way of doing business for The Aidmatrix Foundation, setting a precedent in the responsive, scalable, and cost-effective distribution of its disaster relief solutions. “Accenture and Avanade’s expertise in the Windows Azure platform helped us transition to cloud-based services cost-effectively,” says Ross. “Now we can more quickly scale up and deliver critical solutions for our humanitarian aid partners at times of urgent need.”

Reduced Operating Costs

Migrating its solutions to the cloud means that Aidmatrix no longer has to purchase servers or pay for their maintenance. Nor does it have to pre-position servers at data centers and pay for them to be ready. “Paying up front for resources to be in place is now a thing of the past,” says Ross. “Depending on location, the cost structure of a Windows Azure implementation could be 90 percent less than our previous expenses at an international data center, or 20 percent less at a U.S. data center,” says Ross. “So at the very least, we are expecting to pay 20 percent less on data center costs. We can redirect that money to other IT projects that augment our products and help our partners to save lives.”

Improved Responsiveness

Aidmatrix is using Windows Azure to reduce the time it takes to ramp up to meet the demands of a humanitarian crisis. That’s because the cloud-based applications are ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. “When we deployed a web-portal solution for international fundraising and donation management to help people recover from the tsunami in Japan, it only took a couple of hours to activate our solutions in the cloud at a Microsoft data center in Hong Kong,” says Ross. “Before Windows Azure,

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this kind of project would have taken several days. We were able to streamline deployment because all Microsoft data centers are consistent across the globe, and with the Windows Azure content delivery network, the technology to deploy and manage them is consistent as well.”

Improved IT Productivity

Aidmatrix IT staff members are more productive now that they don't have to administer servers and upload software updates. And when it comes to developing and testing new solutions, the IT department no longer has to deploy servers for the technology build, Q&A, test, and deployment cycles. “We have more time to focus on innovation at the application level,” says Ross. “With the Windows Azure development environment, it's much faster to test and deploy new software. A project that would have taken us six weeks to do last year, buying servers and deploying them for the entire development cycle, would today take a couple of hours.”

Increased Scalability

Now that it has moved its solutions to the cloud, Aidmatrix can take advantage of the global distribution of Microsoft data centers and a payment schedule based on usage. That way, the operating costs of Aidmatrix are exactly aligned to the dramatic shifts in demand that the organization faces. “We can use the Windows Azure platform to quickly deploy our solutions close to the location of a disaster and then scale back just as quickly as the emergency subsides,” says Ross.

“With a global network of Microsoft data centers at our disposal, Aidmatrix can more easily grow the international side of our business, helping more people in more locations while spending less. It's a great position to be in, and Accenture and Avanade helped us get there.”

About Aidmatrix

Headquartered in Dallas, Texas, The Aidmatrix Foundation is a nonprofit organization committed to providing supply-chain management, fundraising, and volunteer management solutions that, in turn, help relief organizations procure, manage, and deliver aid when humanitarian crises arise around the world. More than 40,000 business, nonprofit, and government partners use Aidmatrix's solutions to mobilize more than U.S.\$1.5 billion in humanitarian relief each year.

Aidmatrix has offices in Dallas, Texas; Washington, D.C.; Middleton, Wisconsin; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Munich, Germany; and New Delhi, India.

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About Avanade

Avanade provides business technology services and managed services that connect insight, innovation and expertise in Microsoft® technologies to help customers realize results. Our people have helped thousands of organizations in all industries improve performance business agility, employee productivity, and customer loyalty. Additional information can be found at: www.avanade.com

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