



Virtual Benefits

Axon has completed an implementation of VMware ESX servers at the Automobile Association (AA) and is now reaping benefits ranging from quick and easy provisioning of new projects, to a significant reduction in late night maintenance calls.

The AA has one of the largest data networks in New Zealand. They needed to replace aging MS-based servers, and wanted a high-availability solution that would be cost-effective, and solve maintenance headaches. Maintenance windows are almost non-existent at AA, as the company runs 24x7.

Axon kicked off the project by provisioning two large HP servers at each of AA's two IT sites. The servers are connected to a SAN, enabling load balancing. Virtual servers sit on the SAN where the AA can run dozens of virtual servers at each location. The two sites are mirrors of each other, part of AA's strategy for disaster recovery. Axon then upgraded AA's entire range of individual servers, taking AA from NT 4.0 and Exchange 5.5 to MS Server 2003 and Exchange 2003.

"I can try the new Oracle application server, or a new virus filter just by downloading and running it. In the past I would have had to source an old server and go through the steps to configure it before downloading. We can discuss an idea and try it out without filling in requisition forms or involving the Governance Board. And of course if you can just go ahead and build it, and show that it works well, it's much easier to then get signoff."

Thomas Layzell
NZ AA
Network Manager

The use of VMWare has largely solved AA's maintenance window problem. AA can move servers from one physical host to another with no service interruption, and service individual servers in the middle of the day with no disruption of IT services.

The AA now has the ability to rapidly deploy additional servers, or to swap out a server that goes down. Load balancing is made easy by the 'shared SAN' architecture, and has greatly simplified the backing up of data.

Virtualisation means the AA can provision servers very quickly; something Thomas Layzell says is invaluable for project work.

"A project may need a web server, application server and a database server. Conventionally, you have to size and buy three servers, install them into the rack, and hope you've made the right call on the space and memory required. In the VM world you just click on 'create new server' and within thirty minutes you're up and running. If you need more memory you just adjust the memory value," says AA network manager Thomas Layzell.

Thomas Layzell says easy remote access to servers has reduced call outs. "Remote consoles cost a lot for traditional servers – we would have them on some servers but not on others. VMware gives us the ability to turn servers on, watch them boot up, and add more memory remotely. This has significantly reduced call outs."

The AA did cost a traditional alternative – and found it would have been 30% more expensive. They have also provisioned much since then, and have not had to buy another server.

"But I don't buy just on price. You have to ask 'how will this fit with our business?' In our case, virtual was definitely the way to go," Thomas Layzell says.

Axon's, NZ AA project partner:

