

Kinetics moves

MCELROYS INTO THE CLOUD WITH AZURE VIRTUAL DESKTOP

With ageing server infrastructure supporting its practice management software coming up for a refresh, law firm McElroys checked in with its managed services provider Kinetics for guidance on the available options.

Rather than potentially spending up to a hundred thousand dollars on a replacement system, Kinetics instead recommended moving the existing on-premises software into the Microsoft Azure cloud. Combined with Microsoft Azure Virtual Desktop, the result is minimal impact on the user experience and a fit-for-purpose solution enabling flexible work.





McElroys are experts in insurance law, civil litigation and maritime litigation helping the New Zealand business community navigate risk and resolve complex legal problems. The firm has been operating for over 30 years, called upon by global and national clients to navigate risk and resolve legal challenges ranging from leaky buildings to employment and statutory prosecutions.

Situation

The issue confronting General Manager, Paul Sullivan, is probably familiar to legal practices around New Zealand. "We're a team of around 25 staff and have a very effective and familiar practice management system," he starts out.

No problems there. But, with changing ways of working and an increasing need for flexibility, the on-premises system had a major drawback. "It requires a server on-site. That means a poor experience for anyone accessing it who isn't on site. We realised that as more people work from home or 'anywhere', we needed a virtual environment along with an improved user experience both in and out of the office."

On top of that, the physical server hosting the practice management software was reaching end of life, requiring an expensive hardware upgrade. Initial investigations pointed towards changing to different practice management and document management solutions. The 'latest greatest' cloud platform management implementation as one option, with the hardware upgrade as another.

There were two issues with that. "The first is that apart from the flexibility, the current system is known and loved by our people. The second is that new software is both costly and disruptive," says Sullivan.



Solution

With its IT support handled competently by Kinetics over a period of several years, the approaching server end-of-life was very much on the agenda. "As it crept closer, we'd continued discussions on what the options were. They knew we preferred a virtual solution and were looking for what the best and most cost-effective plan of action might be."

When one of Kinetics' engineers indicated the possibility of building a server in Azure, Sullivan was interested, having himself previously investigated the option. This effectively modernises the application by hosting it in a Microsoft data centre rather than an on-premises server, with access facilitated by Microsoft Azure Virtual Desktop.

As sensitive information is a stock in trade for a legal office, comprehensive security provided with the Azure cloud serves McElroys well. Built-in security services include security intelligence identifying evolving threats early, and layered, defence in-depth services across identity, data, hosts, and networks.

Azure Virtual Desktop builds on the security of Microsoft Azure, with built in identity management, data encryption, and multifactor authentication.

The proposed benefits were clear: little to no change management, while McElroys would gain the flexibility it required from its practice management software. As an added bonus, the need to upgrade the on-premises hardware drops away permanently.

"That sounded great, but we wanted certainty that it would work," says Sullivan.

After establishing a Proof of Concept, Kinetics demonstrated the viability of the approach. The next step was careful planning for migration and establishing the practice management solution in the virtual hosted environment. "At that stage, Kinetics brought in a project manager from their sister company Kambium; everything went very smoothly, and over an Easter weekend we did a cutover."

Results

While issues are inevitable with any significant software project, Sullivan says the entire process including the switchover went smoothly. "There's always little things and refinements as people tend to break it in ways you didn't expect," he smiles. "And we did upgrade the versions of Windows server and on our people's machines, which has minor implications."

However, the big picture proved an immediate win. "Having said that, our people were able to start working from day one, and apart from two instances where we've gone offline because of resource issues, the system has been very reliable."

Over the course of several months, Sullivan adds that "That's not a lot of downtime for an office of our size."

He credits Kinetics for its careful planning and attention to change management – which, while not a major overhead for this particular project, is always a success factor. "Our people were kept aware of what was happening, so there were no surprises. The biggest change, really, is a sign in via an app."

Sullivan says the delivery of the combination of an Azure hosted application and Azure Virtual Desktop has future-proofed McElroys, allowing its people to securely communicate and work anywhere they have a laptop and an internet connection. "We don't have to spend a hundred thousand on a practice management software upgrade. And we don't have to deal with the upheaval of moving to a new and unfamiliar system. It's the same software we all enjoy using, it just works faster and better."