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Mike Clark, Systems Manager, Unibill, LLC

Business Profile

Company Name:
Unibill, LLC

Headquarters:
Lake Charles, Louisiana

Industry:
Billing Service

Ownership:
Private

Business Environment:

- Application Service Provider with commitments for 24/7, 365 day a year availability
- Clients need real-time access for billing purposes
- Headquarters situated in a region of the U.S. that is prone to hurricanes
- Handles millions of dollars of client billings annually

Implementation Team:

- Unibill Technicians
- Vision Solutions Technical Support

Vision Solutions Products:
iTera HA for i5/OS

Critical Issue

Unibill provides ASP billing services to land line, long distance, wireless, and VoIP telephone companies, as well as vendors who offer cable TV. Unibill's business model demands 24/7 system availability for real time call rating, along with 100% data integrity.

One of the most severe hurricanes of the 2005 season caused Unibill to lose communication between its primary production computer, an IBM iSeries model 810, its remote mirrored backup, and its clients. While a bunker-style operations facility was well protected against Hurricane Rita, and a 280 KVA diesel generator and UPS capacity for 200 minutes had their power requirements covered, their data link to the outside world was completely severed.

Results

- Maintained a production computing environment on their backup iSeries server for four consecutive weeks with negligible impact on its customers.
- Operated in a business-as-usual mode even though they ran on a completely different system in Texas.
- Won Billing & OSS Today Excellence Award in 2007.
- Recognized by IBM and named as a System i Innovation Awards finalist in the category of Business Resiliency.

Technologies

- iTera™ HA for i5/OS®
- Production Server: IBM® iSeries® model 810
- Remote Backup Server: IBM System i™ model 520
- Unibill's AEGIS/SECURE prepaid billing services system

Business Challenge

Unibill provides billing services to its clients. With no signal on the VPN line that connected Unibill to its customers and no way to access customer records for billing purposes, technicians at Unibill scrambled to reestablish service.

Unibill had licensed iTera HA from premier high availability software vendor Vision Solutions and by August 2005, it was close to placing this system into production. As a final test of the HA environment, they had planned to have customers reconfigure their IP addresses so they would be redirected from the production server in Lake Charles, Louisiana, to the backup HA server located in Dallas, Texas.

Unibill had scheduled this event for October, but Hurricane Rita was impatient and struck in September, before testing was finalized.



Solution

Fortunately, Unibill also had a high availability backup site in Dallas so they performed an emergency role swap (commonly called a “failover”) and immediately called Vision Solutions.

When Unibill staff arrived at the backup site early Saturday morning, technicians at Vision guided them through the necessary system audits on the model 520 backup server. Because Unibill was relatively new to iTera HA, a Vision technician stayed on the telephone throughout the whole process. “I was very pleased with their commitment,” says Mike Clark, Systems Manager of Unibill. “They said they were going to support us, and they were there whenever we needed them.”

Together, Clark and Vision’s support staff found that the backup server had committed every transaction up to the point where the communication lines had failed. All that remained was to have Unibill’s customers point their systems to the IP address for the backup 520 in Dallas.

While waiting for electrical and other services to be restored at the primary location in Lake Charles, Unibill continued to run on the backup server for four weeks. “Though our customers were impacted as a result of the unplanned failover, they were nonetheless able to continue with their mission-critical processes on the HA server just like nothing had ever happened,” says Clark.

As a result of a real-world natural disaster, Unibill had performed an unexpected failover, conducted business remotely, and later rolled operations back to their systems in Lake Charles. All the while, they maintained business continuity, system availability, and data integrity.

Today, Clark is well-versed in the operation of iTera HA. “I find it to be very straightforward and easy to use. iTera HA runs on top of i5/OS and utilizes many of its functions to do its job. Vision makes it easy to maintain the iTera HA software with an automated PTF system. I like the fact that I don’t have to bring the entire HA system down to apply them.”

In the end, the chaotic situation that Unibill was thrown into would have been much worse without iTera HA. According to Clark, as a new hurricane season approaches, “I am confident that as far as iTera HA is concerned, we have the right technology in place, and we are well-prepared for whatever comes our way.”

As a footnote, Unibill has won several awards for providing excellent customer service in the wake of Hurricane Rita.



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