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A second opinion from Zones meets EHR objectives and virtualization goals for hospital data center.

The project

Opelousas General Health System (OGHS) – a five-time Hospital and Health Networks magazine Most Wired Hospital honoree – prides itself on its innovative use of healthcare technology.

Early in 2012, OGHS scheduled a system upgrade with its longtime clinical solution provider to address key security, compliance, and EDI issues necessary to achieve Phase I meaningful use objectives. Meeting the Phase I objectives would mean improved quality of care for patients and qualify the hospital for substantial incentive payments from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

Client:
Opelousas General Health System, Opelousas, LA

IT Project:
Rework IT configuration specified by the hospital's EHR solution provider.

Challenge:
Leverage a required upgrade to increase data center virtualization.

Solution:
Deploy a system that meets functional requirements while reducing server sprawl.

Results:
OGHS cut total cost of ownership for the system upgrade, improved data center utilization, and is meeting key meaningful use objectives.

The challenge

OGHS IT leaders saw a scheduled upgrade as an opportunity to leverage a required investment for broader IT objectives, including data center virtualization to improve system resilience, server utilization and disaster-preparedness.

A problem arose when it became clear that the system upgrades proposed by the clinical solutions vendor would not address the hospital's broader objectives. While the upgrade would allow the hospital to meet essential Phase I objectives, it called for 17 new servers that would provide minimal virtualization capability.

Before committing to the upgrade package, OGHS wanted an objective opinion on the proposal as well as some fresh ideas on how they might achieve their Phase I and virtualization goals simultaneously. For that they turned to Zones, an authorized reseller for the State of Louisiana contract. Zones healthcare specialist Artina Mitchell points out that "Zones has become very familiar with the OGHS environment over the years." "They asked me to take a look at the proposed setup to make sure it met their needs."

The solution

After years of working together with her on projects as diverse as radiology image server deployments, software licensing management, and end-user computing, the OGHS IT team counted on Mitchell for her candor, insight, and deep understanding of the organization's clinical, IT and business goals.

Project Review. Reading through the detailed proposal, Mitchell noted a number of issues related to scope and priorities. "As often happens," Mitchell explains, "the clinical solution vendor dictated what OGHS needed, and implied that all hardware and software needed to be procured from them in order to guarantee the upgrade's functionality.

"Our goal was to ensure complete functionality while increasing virtualization, reducing server sprawl and lowering total cost of ownership for the long term."

Mitchell saw that the proposed solution would also expand the data center's physical footprint, something that OGHS was trying hard to avoid. Beyond that, it did little to address downtime – a key issue OGHS wished to solve with the upgrade.

"The initial configuration would have filled an entire extra server rack," says Mitchell. "And the way it was designed, if one of the application servers were to go down, everything running on that server would be completely unavailable – and we're talking about a hospital."

In the originally concepted virtualized environment OGHS wanted to deploy, if a server went down, applications running on it would immediately failover to other machines, eliminating downtime.

Design. Mitchell consulted her server and virtualization colleagues at Zones, IBM and VMware, and then ran an ROI analysis on alternative configurations. Together, they devised a virtualized system based on four IBM Blade servers that also included volume licensing for advanced support. The system configured by the Zones-led team would fully meet Opelousas's operational needs, occupy a smaller physical footprint, and do so with significant short- and long-term cost savings.

Obstacles. Before OGHS could move forward with the Zones solution, there were a few hurdles to clear. The EHR vendor's contract stipulated that they had approval authority over any IT configurations running their software. Of course, the new configuration passed muster. The vendor then insisted that they handle procurement of the system at a higher cost than Zones had quoted.

After staging fee negotiations, the vendor granted Opelousas permission to purchase the Zones-configured server system directly from Zones.

Deployment. Opelousas placed the order for the new blade servers, supporting equipment, and software with Zones. All components shipped from Zones within 3 business days, and were soon installed and operational.

Results

At the end of the day – and despite the vendor's staging fee – Opelousas saved more than $20,000 by implementing the Zones configuration. More important, OGHS immediately met its data center virtualization goal while achieving Phase I certification and qualifying for CMS incentive payments within weeks of the implementation.

Thinking about the challenges that had to be overcome to get this project done, Mitchell says it came down to capability, understanding, and trust. "I've worked closely with the Opelousas team for a long time," says Mitchell. "I know what they care about and what their goals are, and I have a good understanding of where they are going with their business."