

The Sisters of Mercy find flexibility in the Cloud



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On 12 December 2011, 15 independent congregations of religious Catholic women came together to form the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Totalling approximately 920 women, the Institute is dedicated to serving people who suffer from injustices related to poverty, sickness or lack of education. Its support programs include asylum seekers and refugees, women and poverty, eco justice and indigenous concerns.

The processes behind such a merging of congregations were significant. Each congregation operated as its own autonomous entity and there were no common systems in place. Some used Apple computers, others Windows-based systems. Some had servers while others relied on stand-alone PCs. If the Institute was to bring everyone together under one umbrella organisation some of the first requirements had to include a new networked IT infrastructure and a unified approach to information management including office productivity applications and a financial management system.

Before this could occur however, each group had to conduct a vote to confirm whether or not the merger should proceed. Following this, the groups had to seek approval from the Vatican to close down the old congregations and create a new one. Until this approval was given no logistical or administrative work could really begin. When word was received from Rome in mid-July 2011, it left just five months to prepare before a new infrastructure had to be in place.

Ian Hobbs, the Institute's newly appointed Director of Finance and Administration immediately set to work. He says, "We needed a platform that would allow us to work as one across all locations so that we could service the Sisters throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea. Because we didn't really have any legacy systems we needed an accounting system, payroll, email and office software."

Hobbs wanted a solution that would link four main offices in Melbourne, Sydney, Newcastle and Rockhampton, along with 11 other offices extending from Adelaide and Perth, to Central New South Wales and Papua New Guinea. Having worked with cloud-based CRM and marketing services in the past, he was optimistic that such an approach could suit the Institute's needs.

"In many ways we were a greenfield site. We didn't really have any legacy system or a big investment in equipment that would be lost if we went to the cloud. It meant we could set up in one place and easily deploy to anywhere, and it would allow us to operate remotely. This was important because we are travelling between offices all the time. It made a lot of sense," Hobbs explains.



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The countdown

To assist with supplier selection, Hobbs brought in an external consultant who conducted a mini-tender. After reviewing potential hosts, the Institute awarded the contract to cloud pioneers and specialists OBT. "We selected a hosted desktop environment from OBT because they were prepared to support us across the country, something that most of the other suppliers thought would be too hard," Hobbs observes. In addition, OBT appealed because it offered a local data centre which ensured that none of the Institute's data would ever need to be stored offshore.

With an implementation window of less than four weeks, OBT began provisioning a widearea network across 16 Australian sites. It built and populated the Institute's new Greentree Financial Management System and prepared office productivity applications for delivery via the cloud.

Along the way OBT spent time liaising with each of the 15 congregations' IT providers. In Melbourne, for example, OBT had to coordinate with a network supplier, the congregation's server host, and a separate email host to ensure that all necessary data was migrated to the new environment.

"Right from the start OBT was upfront about what they could do in the time available," Hobbs says. "They were very responsive, dealing with issues that came up that we didn't know about in advance. It's fair to say that we threw a few things at them that they hadn't come across before, but they quickly got up to speed and dealt with them."

Will it be fast enough?

There remained one aspect of cloud services that Hobbs was uncertain about. "I did have some reservations about a fully hosted desktop environment in terms

of connection speeds and the reliability of Internet connections. However, the relationship between OBT and Internode, the ISP, was close enough for them to say that they would sort it out and that they could get the speeds we were after in the time we needed it to happen."

As the go live date drew closer, Hobbs says, "We got the system in, trialled it and it all worked immediately."

All have adjusted to the shift from a local PC to cloud services. "OBT provides a Desktop Anywhere® service which means that users simply log onto "their" session on any PC. Once they've done this, the desktop environment remains pretty much the same as it was before, only rather than using a local server or PC, all our data is stored in the data centre and anyone on our platform can access the files according to the security structure. One benefit of this is we don't end up duplicating files between offices " Hobbs points out.

The financial sense of scalability

Besides enabling the Institute to rapidly develop and deploy an IT capability, Hobbs believes the choice of cloud services has long-term financial ramifications. "The cloud is instantly scalable – up and down – and this will allow us to adjust user numbers as necessary. So, from our perspective, the cloud is a particularly effective way of dealing with an organisation that is not of a fixed size."

"All along, the service from OBT has been excellent. They've been very helpful, pro-actively telling us about new developments and keeping up the impetus to finish off the things that we weren't ready to do right away. They've spent time trying to understand us, because we are a bit different to most clients. We're happy with what they've done," Hobbs smiles.

