

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview on behalf of Qwest

Aristides (Ari) Ioanides

BoardDocs

President/Owner

Last updated: 2009 May 18



Product(s): Hosting
Industry: Technology

1. Business need

"The business challenges we were facing were, basically, we had to grow, and we had a budget kind of service with another company. And what we wanted to do was be able to support our very fast growth, which is 50 to 75 percent per year, be able to meet our customers' needs, and also add some services we didn't have. Specifically, we wanted people to be able to put hands on servers if we ever had a problem.

And while our other service was good and it was reliable, it just didn't give us the level of service that we needed. So really what we were looking for was a more comprehensive service that was offered that met many of our needs. And some of those needs were, specifically, we wanted someone to be able to touch the servers; we wanted kind of an all-in-one package solution where we didn't have to manage multiple vendors; and then we also wanted the ability to grow, so we needed that bandwidth and that kind of upward scalability that we were looking for.

Things also that we were looking to do were to make sure that the bandwidth of the organization that we went with was big enough--multiple peering points, things like that--so that our customers all over the country are able to get good high-speed access. That was important.

I think we were at something like 45 megabits per second before and we were looking for really a lot more speed. And the other thing we were looking for [was] it had to be up 100 percent of the time, so we needed, you know, SLAs that would guarantee that we would have the service up. We can't go down; it's gotta be up.

These are [municipality] meetings, this is public information, it's accessed 24 hours a day. Folks meet at the weirdest times, and since we're covering all the time zones in the United States, it was important that we found someone who could stay up and give us the bandwidth we needed."

2. Evaluation & selection

"When we decided we needed to make a move, we decided to go with an RFP process, and it was important to us that we defined our business needs ahead of time and then make those known to a wide number of vendors.

So what we did was develop the criteria which predominantly were the ability to put hands on a server; we wanted, once again, very, very fast Internet access; we wanted multiple peering points; we wanted a choice of hosting locations; we wanted someone who had specific competencies with the technologies that we were using--Sun and IBM software; and then we wanted to obviously have the basic stuff--racks, power, redundancy, things like that.

So we put out the RFP to approximately five vendors, and it became pretty clear pretty quickly that Qwest was gonna suit those needs the best.

We had other people who could partner with folks with regard to things like being able to put hands on the servers or bring things up or they had software folks here. But what we found with Qwest was we were able to find one group with a single set of services that would solve our needs pretty well. It wasn't the cheapest, but it turned out to be, I think, one of the best decisions we made."

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3. Why Qwest?

"After we put out the RFP, we spoke with several customers and Qwest really rose to the top for several reasons.

The primary reason was they had--they were able to address all the needs themselves internally.

They didn't have to partner with anyone else to do things like put hands on the server or support the software. So other vendors we talked to in the process of evaluating the RFPs, they would actually have a third party on the line. 'Well, we can do all this, but not this part, so we're bringing in this partner,' which made us a little uneasy. We really wanted centralized building, a single point of contact, and Qwest gave us that single point of contact pretty early on and allowed us to really fit the business needs that we needed extensively.

Some of the things that rose to the top were the managed services, specifically with regard to firewall services and VPN; that's important to us because we provide two services that we really need--one is our back-end back office solutions, which require things like phone service, require back office networking.

You know, we host e-mail on our side, the collaborative groupware we do. All those things needed to be managed, and Qwest was able to do that.

And then we had external needs for, of course, our customers, and Qwest was able to do that, too--manage a cluster of servers, help install and manage things like fiber disk arrays, give us backup services.

So Qwest really gave us the whole body of what we were looking for where the other vendors really weren't. And it was kind of surprising, too, because the other vendors were large, you know? And I didn't expect a Baby Bell to be able to be as responsive as they were, but they did a really good job.

One of the big concerns we had with the selection process was the ability for us to be able to--or the ability for the vendor to be able to support our technologies, and those include Sun servers and Domino on Sun.

We did find a lot of vendors who had experience in Domino, including IBM, but we didn't find a lot of folks who had expertise on Sun.

Now we weren't married to the Sun platform--we had options to look at things like AIX--but Sun really gave us the best combination of power and performance so that--we're a green company, so we were looking for the fewest number of watts, greatest amount of power as far as processing power we could get.

Sun gave us that, and Qwest stepped up pretty early and said 'Yeah, we have the Sun expertise' and we were able to verify that, and also the Domino expertise.

That's a hard combination to find, Domino and Sun on one platform. Even IBM tech support, a lot of times, we can't rely on them. So it turned out that Qwest was able to deliver that, and that was another reason why we decided ultimately to go with Qwest."

4. The implementation/installation

"We have an existing colocation facility in Atlanta, and what we want to do is bring on a new one in Denver, which was the site we ultimately chose for several reasons.

So we can't be down, so that switchover has to be really seamless. So what we did is we worked with Qwest to come up with a plan to do just that--bring up the new facility, make sure everything works, and then start cutting over the servers in a controlled environment. So we weren't cutting over everything at once.

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So we worked with the Qwest team; they assigned us a single technical point of contact, which was great. This guy was really phenomenal, and that's when really it started to be apparent that Qwest had a huge advantage because technology's pretty much ubiquitous--it's the people that make the difference, and I think here is where we begin to see how it worked.

So what we did was we actually ordered all the equipment from the various vendors and had it shipped to the Qwest colocation facility. We didn't even deliver to our offices, or our people never looked at it. We actually sent it there and the Qwest folks, for the most part, brought the machines up, did the initial imaging with their standard imaging, and it involved, you know, different operating systems and different hardware including HP; F5; Sun; you know, Nokia that was actually provided by Qwest; there was Cisco back-end equipment; there was the racking.

So all this different equipment had to be shipped, and we shipped it in and Qwest had the ability to bring those things up, configure them to our specifications, get them on the Internet where then we could work with them to get them configured and ready to go.

So you're talking about clustering services, you're talking about, you know, disk arrays from Hitachi--and all this was installed in a rack.

Once again, our staff never even went to the site and was able to remotely configure it and get it going, and then little by little we were able to move those services over.

The first services we moved over were our back-office services through the firewall; that went very, very well. We were able to replicate the data from our Atlanta site to the Denver site, which took us two or three tries, but ended up moving a NAS, which was kind of an interesting way of doing it, and then the data had to be synchronized--so we couldn't have like this--you're talking about terabytes of data, you know?

And you can't move that data easily over the network and keep it synchronized, so we literally freighted the item in, brought it in, moved the data, and then turned on synchronization--that worked real well--and then slowly we started moving those things over a little at a time.

Believe it or not, the hardest thing to move over was the phone service, which really surprised us. We use a VoIP technology that actually installs a switch in our location, but we worked hard with Qwest to make sure that was done. Apparently, there was an issue with the way the order was put together, but eventually that got up, too--and I think it took us about three months to get everything switched over because we were very controlled about it.

I don't think our customers even knew the cutover happened other than maybe the service was a little faster after we got it done."

5. Overview of solution

"Our existing solution with Qwest involves really a great number of services.

First of all, there's the basics. We've got rack space, which is a single rack located in Denver. We've got two redundant Internet connections coming into that--so I would say a primary and a redundant's probably more accurate; I think 100 megabit is the standard and I think it bursts up a little higher than that. So that's the basics.

And then, of course, we have managed services--so all the servers we have down there, we have managed services with Qwest which means they monitor the servers and if we need somebody to put hands on an item, we make a phone call and they can put that on.

We have managed backup of those services, which is really nice--so they back up those servers. And then we have managed firewalls. So instead of--when we went into this, we thought 'We're gonna buy a firewall, stick it in with

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the VPN connection', but Qwest came to us with a pretty good proposal for a managed firewall solution which also includes our VPN, which was the Checkpoint Firewall-1 product running on Nokia. So that was put in; they managed that as well.

We also have phone service from Qwest, so that's another service that we're running.

And really, if you break that down, it's two separate suites of services for two separate groups of people; there's our virtual office, which includes all of our folks who work from home, and then if they're traveling, the dial-in--not dial-in, but the VPN service, the client that runs on their machine, that gives them access to all of our back office services, which includes VoIP, file services, all of our back office applications, obviously email, things like that--and then to be able to manage the servers.

And then our second group of people are our customers--they're the more important people--and Qwest provides services for that obviously through the F5. So it's kind of a balancing act to keep all that going, but it works real well for us."

6. Customer service

"Customer service at Qwest is actually probably one of the best parts.

You can--anybody can put technology together and it's pretty ubiquitous these days, but customer service is really what makes the difference, and I think that's probably the main reason we'll stick with Qwest for the long term.

We have a main point of contact; this person, I don't think, sleeps. Keeps his cell phone by his desk; we can call or e-mail pretty much 24 hours a day and he'll know the person within Qwest to route the problem to. So what's good is Qwest is a big company; he makes it small for us and he makes it personal. One of the first things he asked was what does our company do, what are we about, and he's kind of become almost a little extension of our company. So that account rep, the person we talk to--not the salesperson, but the kind of technical contact--has done awesome. I mean very good. Let's us know before he goes on vacation, has another person there; it's really like he works with us.

And when we bring new people on, they're able to integrate into that really quickly. And if we open up a ticket, we're able to go online to check the status of that ticket and make amendments to it; we can copy and paste specifics in for things like firewall upgrades or things so they get it exactly right.

So the customer service has been very, very good--I would say exemplary--even though you're working with different people.

You've got, you know, the cyber center people, who are really awesome. One of the things that we were really looking for was someone to put their hands on a server quickly. Usually I know you have an SLA, but usually that person's standing in front of a server on the phone with us in 10 or 15 minutes, which is really good after a phone call.

And then you have a totally different group that handles managed firewall, you know? And what's nice is we make one phone call and it seems to get to the right place where we can get that done.

So we've been very impressed with the customer service, and really when it shines is when something goes wrong--and something always goes wrong. And you know, it could be our fault, it could be Qwest's fault, and they really step up to the plate to make sure that those services are up and they're running quickly."

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7. Non-financial benefits

"Well, some of the benefits we got from moving to Qwest were things we were looking for, so specifically when a server goes down, not to have to dispatch one of our people on site to go and hit that server--which our people don't mind getting out of bed at 3:00 a.m. in the morning--well, okay, maybe they do.

What we were looking for is, you know, not a 30-minute or 1-hour delay until we can get somebody on site, but maybe 10 or 15 minutes. So that was the first thing we saw--which, you know, there's not a dollar amount associated with that, it's just the ability to respond to our customers' needs better.

The other thing that we got, or that we continue to get from working with Qwest, is we tend to extend our technical capabilities.

We've got a tremendous technical staff, but by being able to contact someone at Qwest who knows Sun or who knows IBM Domino, who understands network architecture, and bounce our ideas off of them or kind of run our architecture through them, that's a bonus. Kind of the more eyes and the more people you see working on an idea tends to make it better, and it helps to have someone else technical to talk things off of.

We use our resources at IBM and we use our resources at Sun, but having one more team member in Qwest is also just something that we've found to be really nice. And then the response times also are great. You know, to be able to pick up a phone and call somebody and have them, you know, touch an item or address an issue really quickly--those are wonderful.

Some other bonuses we saw is the increased bandwidth--means better speed and performance for our customers. That's a big plus. And a lot of the other plusses came from just whenever you put in new hardware--things tend to run faster and better.

So a couple of the other benefits we found with Qwest were the nationwide footprint, and what that does is it means that--well, you know, one of the things that's kind of a challenge is when you talk to different offices with Qwest--they're all over the country--the network, the way the network is spread out, it gives us the ability to really--for our customers to access our service anywhere and get good response.

So when you think about offering up software as a service the way we do, it's important that people all over the country be able to access that. So initially what that means is that someone in New York's going to get great access time--you know, it's gonna stay on the Qwest network as long as it can until it gets to the particular peering point; someone in southern California's gonna get great access time.

Beyond that, with regard to future expansion, it means that we're able to put in additional servers in different colocation facilities to get those servers closest to our customers and also to provide another layer of redundancy.

We haven't seen that yet, but that's part of our future plans and that's something that we're hoping to put into place.

All that leads to our end users' customer experience has to be--it's gotta be up, it's gotta be fast, and it has to be reliable, and we know that Qwest has been a good partner in providing those services and making sure that it's up for us."

8. Measurable benefits

"Some of the measurable benefits we got with Qwest were kind of a surprise actually because you expect when you go from kind of a budget organization to, you know, one of the high-end ones, you may run into some--it's gonna cost more.

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But one of the bonuses was the phone service was a lot less--I think probably a fifth of what we were paying before. And we were getting, you know, dedicated T-1 access; it was apples to apples. And I think part of that was Qwest realized that we didn't need kind of a local--you know, local calling area.

So when we got our phone service, you know, it was a single T-1, which was nice, and it's all long distance. So you know, long distance going in, 800 service coming out, and that's it, and we were able to substantially cut our phone operations.

Phone's something you kind of take for granted, but it's gotta work--you know, especially with us and the VoIP that we use; it's gotta be up, our customers have to be able to call us. We have a 7x24 tech support organization that, you know, uses that phone service, so it's gotta be up. And it's been reliable and really, you know, we're able to save some money there.

The other thing is the amount of growth that we have. We're in a 50 to 75 percent growth increase per year and our run rate just continues to increase, and Qwest with their ability, their bandwidth, their hosting, the services have been able to allow us to maintain that.

So you can't be constrained by technology when you offer software as a service; you have to be able to keep up with that growth, and it's allowed us not to even think about it. So we can support our growth and we know that when we get to 500 customers, Qwest'll be there; when we get to 1000, we're still able to support that amount of growth. That's real important. That makes all our decisions much easier; we can focus on things like sales and marketing, you know, and not worry about the technology.

One of the things that we do at Emerald Data Solutions for our software as a service, BoardDocs, is we have an SLA, so the SLA is to our customer, and basically, like Qwest, every hour we're down, we have to write a check, and that check is one hour of service that we're down, you get a day's credit.

And that adds up when you have a bunch of customers. If you're down for, let's say, half a day, that's half a month of service, of revenue, gone. So we cannot be down. Qwest understands that and we've built redundancy into our systems; we've built redundancy into our services on various levels because we have to keep people up.

Beyond the cost--you know, writing checks is one thing, but as soon as your service goes down, people start looking elsewhere, you know? And that cost is huge.

Losing customers is something we're not prepared to do; our attrition is very low and if the service starts becoming unreliable or the performance is bad, we'll lose customers. So that's kind of that, you know, 900-pound gorilla and something that we're trying to keep from happening.

So Qwest allows us to keep the service running; we don't have to write the checks and we're able to maintain our customers and continue our growth."

9. Areas for improvement

"Initially, sometimes we do get that 'There's not a problem.' Like--I'll give you one specific example. We had some slowness on the East Coast with our customers, and specifically down in southern California. We got four or five calls from large customers saying that the performance was bad, so we put in a tech support call to Qwest and 'Well, we really don't see any problem.' So initially I don't think they took as seriously as they could've. And then when we pushed it--when we gave them things like quantifiable ping times, trace routes, the whole deal, they went 'Wow, those numbers are a little high. We'll check into it.'

Well, it turns out that peering point was just fine, but another peering point in another area had gone down and they were routing traffic through there. So as a result, it was getting a little crowded.

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The nice thing about them was when they finally did listen, they did something about it; they listened to us and a few days later, we got this extremely long narrative about who made the call, when initially it happened, which technician looked at it, which card was bad, when it was pulled offline--stepping up to the plate and taking responsibility was just huge for us and it made us feel a little better.

And now when we call in, I think they know since we've got the same people working with [them], they know 'Well, when this tech calls--you know, this guy who really knows his stuff--and says 'There's a problem in southern California,' we're gonna look into it.' So I think initially you could've listened quicker, or Qwest could've listened quicker, but the fact that they learned from their lessons is huge, so I think that turns it around to a positive.

And you know, some of the other little things that they could do better like our only phone number is a 1-800 number, you know? Well, folks aren't generally geared up to handle virtual companies that have offices throughout the United States and folks who work from home without a local number, so one of the rules that Qwest has is you've gotta have a local number--it can't be a 1-800 number--on your billing.

Well, the only numbers we have are 800 numbers; we don't have anything else. There is no local number for Emerald Data Solutions. So Qwest is like 'Well, we can't put that on your bill.' So we had to actually put cell phone numbers on our bill in order to make sure that they could call us if there was an issue. So a couple little things like that, but folks, I think, are catching up with the virtual company idea."

10. Future plans

"When you offer software as a service like we do with [our] BoardDocs [solution], there's always changes and tweaks and--you know, there's always some technology advancement you need to do.

So one of the things we're doing right now is upgrading our ability to back up and respond. What our customers need is--typically this is what happens: 'You know, we've deleted a meeting or we've deleted some items; can you go back and find it?' The backup services we get from Qwest from our back office are excellent, but what we need is something that allows us to respond a little quicker, so what we actually did was ship a very large NAS down to the colocation facility; Qwest is in the process of configuring that and installing it, and once that's in, it'll allow us to manage our own backups for our online services.

Qwest will continue to manage backup services for our back office applications, but what we're doing now is taking over that part, and that flexibility is really nice. That automated system was designed by us in house, implemented by Qwest and our technicians, and now our tech support people can literally restore files while someone calls in.

So we get a phone call to tech support; any of our tech support people, through the back-office applications, can access up to seven days' worth of backup that's now stored on our equipment; they click on it, they get a list of that particular customer, they drag the file over, access them, and they're able to put those things in really less than 20 minutes--and our customers are excited about the ability to respond to that, and Qwest has been really flexible in allowing us to manage that part of the backup and also responding to putting in the equipment.

We're also building redundancy for our load balancers; those devices are being shipped right now to Qwest, and Qwest personnel are managing those and working with F5 to make sure the big IP is configured and put in properly. And then eventually what we'll do is actually put up a second rack in a second colocation facility to provide additional redundancy, and we're looking forward to working with Qwest on that, too."

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11. Recommendations and advice

"If you're looking for a cyber center or you're looking for any suite of services, the best thing you can do is really get a good understanding of your business needs; clearly define those in advance.

I like the RFP process--you know, as a vendor I hate the RFP process, but as a--from our standpoint, it worked real well, and what it allowed us to do is once we defined those business needs and then kind of translated them into technical terms and say 'Here are the things we need,' when we sent that out to the vendors, we got this myriad of answers back, and there were some things that we didn't expect--capabilities and services--that we really didn't think we needed.

So I'd say even though you define those terms and you define that RFP, be open; have a relationship with your potential vendors that allows them to talk about some of the services they offer.

Our initial spec said that we were gonna buy and install a firewall solution, and when we got to talking with Qwest, we realized that their managed firewall services were really everything we needed. Financially, it made good sense, and then the ability to have a whole staff of people manage that firewall was great--so we actually did that. We got a managed firewall solution from Qwest that was not in our initial RFP, and it's turned out to be just wonderful.

So I would say define those business terms in terms of business needs, translate them as best you can into your technical needs--don't make it so rigid so that you don't build a relationship with your vendor because over time, after you start working with somebody, you are gonna want to build a two-way conversation, and that's where I think your organization can best find out what they can do.

So communicate your business needs to your vendor so that they can come back and let you know what their capabilities are. I think that's just huge."



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