

Metal Sales deploys mission-critical servers five times faster with Ubuntu

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Summary

US-based Metal Sales Manufacturing needed to upgrade its server infrastructure so that it could accelerate processes, integrate new applications and scale to meet future requirements. The company needed to implement a cost-effective solution that could improve efficiencies across the organisation. Metal Sales chose to implement Ubuntu Server Edition thanks to its unique long-term support offering and seamless deployment. It found that it could deploy Ubuntu five times more quickly than alternative server platforms. With no superfluous applications and easy integration with existing hardware, Ubuntu is a reliable, high-performing platform on which Metal Sales can run its mission-critical activities.

Business challenge

Companies today face increasing pressure to boost efficiencies while reducing costs. An area of focus for many organisations is the IT infrastructure where improved efficiency can translate into real business benefits.

US-based company Metal Sales Manufacturing was keen to test this theory. Deven Phillips, Senior Systems Administrator, Metal Sales Manufacturing, says: “IT is becoming more and more important – particularly given the state of the economy at the moment. We need to do more with less resources and the only way to do that is with Open Source technology.”

Metal Sales Manufacturing provides roof, wall and fascia panel systems for commercial, industrial, architectural, agricultural and residential markets throughout the US. With 19 branches and 1,000 employees across the country, the Metal Sales IT team must ensure that it can provide Metal Sales workers with a reliable and responsive IT infrastructure.

In 2004, Metal Sales found that its existing infrastructure could not meet the demands of its growing business. Phillips says: “We originally had two Linux servers – one for the firewall and one for the mail server. Both were three years out of date and based on Red Hat. We needed to upgrade our server infrastructure so that it could accelerate our day-to-day processes and support the integration of new applications.”

After evaluating the marketplace, Metal Sales found that the unique Ubuntu release cycle put it ahead of the competition. Because it is released every six months, Ubuntu can integrate with the latest versions of technologies and Linux kernels. In addition, Ubuntu releases a long-term support (LTS) version every two years with full support for five years.

Phillips says: “We decided to investigate Ubuntu, which was growing in popularity. The fact that it stayed so close to the leading edge through quick releases was great. And I was particularly pleased with the LTS release – this is perfect for companies in which a stable server environment is paramount.”

The Ubuntu Server solution

Metal Sales deployed nearly 50 servers based on Ubuntu Server Edition running its common workloads and mission-critical operations. Phillips says: “We run a range of business-critical applications on the Ubuntu server platform. It supports everything from our mail server to our firewall – all of which we could not do without.”



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The Ubuntu server platform runs on a range of hardware including:

- Dell PowerEdge 2650 and 1650 servers
- Dell PowerEdge 2950 and 1750 servers
- IBM H320 blade servers

Ubuntu integrates with the company’s server hardware seamlessly. Phillips says: “We haven’t experienced any compatibility issues. Everything just works.”

Metal Sales has also set up a mirror of the official 7.10 and 8.04 Ubuntu repositories. As a result, IT staff can access thousands of free, up-to-date applications, while making significant bandwidth savings.

Results

Ubuntu is five times faster to deploy than Windows

Metal Sales can add new servers to its IT environment quickly and easily. Phillips has found that Ubuntu Server Edition is particularly quick to deploy. He says: “Ubuntu is much easier to deploy than the alternatives. I would say that Windows takes at least five times longer to install, while other Linux distributions take around three times longer. Even our systems administrators who are more used to working with Windows can follow the guide and deploy Ubuntu in just 15 minutes.

“This is partly because Ubuntu includes all the drivers you need. You don’t need to waste time trying to track down video drivers or SCSI drivers. Canonical have obviously put a lot of effort into choosing simplified, sane settings.”

Centralised systems management accelerates processes

Metal Sales has used Reconstructor to customise the Live Ubuntu CD. According to Phillips, if a computer breaks down at another location, they can simply insert the CD and it will run virus scans, perform back-ups and perform troubleshooting tasks.

Phillips says: “We have a centralised IT department and our offices are based from Alaska to Florida. If there was a problem with a machine in the past, we used to get it shipped to us here. Now the user just needs to put in a CD or USB stick and we can get remote access to the machine.

“It makes a real difference in the time it takes to get a machine back up and running – it really does save us thousands of hours in man power every year.”

Enhanced reliability for mission-critical systems

Metal Sales has seen dramatic improvements in the performance and reliability of its infrastructure since introducing the Ubuntu server platform.

Phillips says: “Before, when we were running on Novell 4.12, the poor performance meant that our users spent a lot of time waiting for their PCs to catch up with them. Now, people can work as efficiently as they need to. They have the tools they need to make tedious tasks point-and-click simple. Ubuntu provides the perfect environment to make these vital tools stable.”

Metal Sales now has an IT infrastructure on which it can depend. The company runs its mission-critical activities on the Ubuntu server platform and has total confidence in its reliability.

Phillips says: “If our systems went down, the business simply couldn’t function. We wouldn’t be able to enter orders or run production, and everything would grind to a halt. We know that we can rely on Ubuntu to keep our business-critical systems up and running. In fact, the biggest worry we have in terms of a lack of business continuity comes from any service issues with our Telecoms providers – not our IT infrastructure.”

Ubuntu infrastructure is easy to maintain

The Metal Sales IT team has also found the Ubuntu platform to be very easy to maintain. As a result, staff can spend less time on day-to-day systems management, and more time developing innovative solutions.

Phillips says: “Ubuntu makes everything so easy to manage. For example, I haven’t had to reboot our mail server since 7.10 (the October 2007 Ubuntu release). I haven’t had to reconfigure it or work with it at all. It’s completely different from my experiences with Microsoft Exchange, which needed babysitting at least three times a week. Exchange just isn’t efficient like Ubuntu.”

