



Information Services Firm Enhances Compliance and Optimizes Data Center

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Financial services

Customer Profile

Based in Houston, Texas, Stewart provides title insurance and related services through more than 9,500 issuing offices and agencies in the United States and abroad. Its 2007 revenues exceeded U.S.\$2.1 billion.

Business Situation

To comply with industry regulations, Stewart participates in over 35 IT audits per year. It needed to improve efficiencies in audit compliance as well as in managing its 1,800 distributed servers.

Solution

Stewart upgraded to Microsoft® System Center Operations Manager 2007 with Audit Collection Services and installed the Compliance Security Suite from Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Secure Vantage Technologies.

Benefits

- Enhanced scalability
- Increased efficiencies
- Reduced audit reporting
- Reduced server build time
- Increased archive storage

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Jeff Skelton, Manager, Enterprise Management Center, Stewart

Houston, Texas–based Stewart Information Services Corporation is an expanding global company committed to delivering state-of-the-art real estate information services to its clients and shareholder value to its investors. In keeping with these goals, Stewart identified two areas for improvement: audit compliance and server management. Stewart upgraded to Microsoft® System Center Operations Manager 2007 with Audit Collection Services and role-based security, and deployed the Compliance Security Suite from Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Secure Vantage Technologies. Using System Center Operations Manager 2007, Stewart reduced the amount of time needed to generate security reports from days to minutes, increased the scalability of servers by consolidating management groups from 7 to 1, and trimmed infrastructure management time by 20 hours per week.

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Mark Helman, Director,
Enterprise IT Management Solutions, Stewart

Situation

Stewart Information Services provides customer-focused, technology-driven real estate information and transaction management services, software, and solutions. Based in Houston, Texas, Stewart provides title insurance and related services through more than 9,500 issuing offices and agencies in the United States and abroad. Its 2007 revenues exceeded U.S.\$2.1 billion.

To support its extensive network, Stewart relies on its Enterprise Management Center (EMC) for server and data center management. “The EMC is responsible for continuously monitoring the health and availability of all enterprise production servers,” says Jeff Skelton, Manager, Enterprise Management Center, Stewart. “Enterprise-wide, we have about 1,800 servers distributed among our corporate and regional data centers.” The majority of servers run on the Windows Server® 2003 operating system, with a few running on the Linux operating system.

Stewart currently manages five regionally dispersed major data centers, but is in the process of consolidating. “By 2009, we’ll have two corporate data centers,” says Skelton. “The primary reason for the consolidation was to reduce IT cost and enhance security and compliance.”

Accurate, timely monitoring of all enterprise servers became even more critical as part of the data center consolidation process. “Virtualization is part of our consolidation strategy,” Skelton says. “System Center Operations Manager in combination with nworks VMware Management Pack has given us eyes into the performance and health of our non-Windows operating systems.”

Another challenge for Stewart was the cost and time involved in complying with industry regulations including Financial Accounting

Standards (FAS), the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX), Privacy and Electronic Communications (PEC) regulations, and Control Objectives for Information and Related Technology (COBIT) best practices. “We’ll have 38 unique, external audits this year,” Skelton explains. “SAS 70 is a huge initiative for us with regard to our data centers and all of our applications, and SOX is obviously important as well. We spent a huge portion of our time—several days every month—rebuilding systems from backups and compiling data for the auditors and our audit team. We needed a more efficient system.”

“Our main business driver is cost savings,” says Mark Helman, Director, Enterprise IT Management Solutions, Stewart. “We’re constantly looking for ways to increase automation and reduce components so we can gain efficiencies across all of IT.” Stewart needed a solution that would simplify the audit process, enhance monitoring, increase scalability, and improve performance.

Solution

When Stewart heard about the release of Microsoft® System Center Operations Manager 2007, it was eager to upgrade. “We’ve used Microsoft Operations Manager 2000 and 2005, so we wanted to start using the latest release as soon as the product was available,” Skelton says. The Enterprise Management Center quickly deployed System Center Operations Manager 2007 to 400 servers and plans to deploy to the remaining servers by the end of the 2nd quarter in 2008.

“The Audit Collection Services component in Operations Manager 2007 was extremely easy to set up, and we gained some really significant value from that almost immediately,” says Skelton. “Now we’re able to run reports and analytics to determine if there are any violations that need investigation or remediation before the

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auditors even arrive. That’s something we simply couldn’t do before.”

Stewart also installed the Compliance Security Suite, which includes the Audit Collection Archiver, Compliance Reporting, and Security Management Packs from Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Secure Vantage Technologies (SVT). “Out of the box, SVT’s products tie directly back to industry regulations,” Skelton explains. “We can actually filter our reports to capture data based on our SOX, SAS 70, COBIT, or PEC compliance efforts.”

The Enterprise Management Center next deployed the enhanced Active Directory® directory service in System Center Operations Manager 2007 and System Center Operations Manager Gateway roles. Skelton says, “We simply installed Operations Manager Gateway servers in the untrusted domains and forests and installed the Operations Manager 2007 agent—something we couldn’t do with Operations Manager 2005. Then we brought the Operations Manager Gateway servers up and connected them back to the primary management server. We can now deploy agents and manage servers seamlessly without having to connect to the untrusted areas.”

As part of the migration from Microsoft Operations Manager 2005, Stewart converted several of the management packs using the built-in conversion utility in System Center Operations Manager 2007. “We have about 14,000 enabled rules and over 30 management packs deployed—both Microsoft and third party,” says Skelton. “Given the scope, the process went quite well.” In addition to System Center Operations Manager 2007, Stewart is also deploying System Center Configuration Manager 2007 and plans to complete the deployment by May 2008. “A primary reason we moved forward with purchasing Configuration

Manager 2007 was because of the integration and the synergies that exist with Operations Manager 2007” says Skelton. “Previously, we had a third-party application for updates, so eliminating the number of views that our engineers have to look into is very beneficial.”

Helman adds that Stewart will use System Center Configuration Manager 2007 to determine the impact of future strategic initiatives, including the deployment of the Windows Vista® operating system. “We plan to use Configuration Manager 2007 to determine what the total impact will be to the organization to do a full deployment of Windows Vista and the 2007 Microsoft Office system across the enterprise,” says Helman. “Several other strategic initiatives hinge upon Configuration Manager and that was the primary reason for pushing forward with this product rather than with a non-Microsoft product.”

Benefits

Stewart is generating tremendous efficiencies across the enterprise by using System Center Operations Manager 2007. Stewart has reduced the amount of time required to produce audit documentation from days to minutes, enhanced monitoring of Microsoft and non-Microsoft applications, and improved server administration through the use of Active Directory and role-based security settings.

Improved Audit Compliance

The amount of time that Stewart engineers and other teams spend collecting data for IT audits has been significantly reduced. “With Audit Collection Services and Secure Vantage reporting solutions, my team has reduced the amount of time that we spend collecting security log information or other COBITs that are required for audits by 30 percent,” says Skelton. “In some cases, that timesavings will be even higher. For example, we just

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completed an investigation and pulled the security report in less than 5 minutes. In the past it would have taken days to rebuild the system from backups and recreate the information.”

Helman adds, “We’ve also used Audit Collection Services to gain visibility into potential security violations that in the past would have gone unnoticed.”

The Audit Collection Archiver management pack from SVT also played an instrumental role in the solution. “Because we’re required by internal IT policy to keep security data for 12 months, the database was growing tremendously large,” Skelton explains. “Using SVT’s Audit Collection Archiver in conjunction with Audit Collection Services in Operations Manager 2007, we’ve been able to lower the cost of that storage. In fact, we’ve already realized a 45-percent space savings through the compression features of the archiving tool.”

Enhanced Monitoring

Stewart is using the new distributed application designer tool in System Center Operations Manager 2007 to build Web site monitors that perform synthetic transactions. “We’re actually able to perform and measure test transactions,” says Skelton. “That’s really benefited us because not only do we know that the Web site is available and answering, but we know that it’s performing at an acceptable level.

“We’re also finding that the self-tuning thresholds, the alerts, and some of the new management packs are much more proactive,” Skelton continues. “We’re able to focus on legitimate issues because there’s less noise on the console. Also, we really enjoy the built-in notification system in Operations Manager 2007.”

Skelton says that the Enterprise Management Center is using System Center Operations Manager 2007 to monitor third-party applications as well as Microsoft technologies. “Before Operations Manager 2007, we really had no visibility into the performance of non-Microsoft host servers, like VMWare’s ESX 3.0. Now that we can use the management pack by nworks IT Solutions with Operations Manager 2007, we have eyes into our virtual environment that we couldn’t monitor before.”

Consolidation, Scalability

Skelton notes that Stewart has been able to increase scalability using the System Center Operations Manager Gateway role. “We needed seven management groups prior to Operations Manager 2007, and now we’re able to manage everything from one group,” says Skelton. “This is quite beneficial for us and will significantly reduce our total cost of ownership.”

Simplified Server Management

Skelton comments, “We’re already seeing the value of integrating with Active Directory. We do frequent server builds and changes, so the ability to add the agents to our image and then simply pick up the configuration from Active Directory is huge. In Operations Manager 2005, we spent at least 15 to 30 minutes per server uninstalling and reinstalling agents and moving them around. With Operations Manager 2007, those steps are eliminated, which saves us a minimum of 10 to 20 hours per week.”

Stewart is finding that the role-based security feature of System Center Operations Manager 2007 is also proving to be a major benefit. “Because of the role-based security in Operations Manager 2007, we’ve been able to give consoles to other engineering teams and other groups so they can access the monitoring and performance metrics themselves,” Skelton explains. “I can define

which groups can open the console, which actions they can perform, and which groups of servers they can access. Now we have more eyes on the individual systems, models, and services, so we can identify and investigate errors or warnings that might have otherwise been overlooked and remediate those before they become service-impacting.”

Skelton adds, “One of the most common requests that the EMC received from the engineering team was for performance reports. Now they can access those directly through the console. This has reduced the amount of time EMC engineers spend compiling performance data by 20 hours per week.”

Enhanced Data Center Management

Stewart is using System Center Operations Manager 2007 and Configuration Manager 2007 to support its data center consolidation strategy. “We’re looking at how we can use the System Center products to positively impact our data centers,” says Helman. “We’re seeing interest in Green Initiatives and the drive to conserve space, both of which create their own unique challenges. I anticipate that the ability of System Center products to integrate with our other systems will be very beneficial for our facilities teams.

“We’ve already expanded our monitoring to include our facilities equipment—generator systems, air conditioning units, and water sensors,” Helman continues. “We recently had an experience where we received an alert from Operations Manager and the EMC quickly dispatched its facilities services to investigate. Water under the floor had caused a leak in one of our facilities rooms. Thanks to Operations Manager we detected a leak that we may never have found otherwise.”

Helman concludes, “Using Microsoft System Center Operations Manager 2007 and Secure Vantage Compliance Security Suite to streamline our processes and obtain better efficiencies, we considerably reduced the workload on other engineering teams. It’s been very satisfying to present to our board and CEO how many hours we’ve transitioned from other engineering teams to the EMC, and the efficiencies that we’ve generated by freeing up those resources.”

For More Information

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For more information about Secure Vantage Technologies products and services, call 888-772-3328 or visit the Web site at: www.securevantage.com

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Software and Services

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