As a technology-driven contact center outsourcer, AFFINA must ensure the constant availability of its contact centers and related CRM services. AFFINA worked with HP to create a flexible, reliable computing infrastructure – based on HP storage-area network (SAN) technology and SAN-implementation services – which also boosted the performance and reliability of its information systems.

"Price point, easy expandability and reliability sold us on HP StorageWorks solutions."

— John May
Enterprise Systems Architect
AFFINA
EVA technology at the heart of 24x7 customer-relationship management

When customer-service professionals answer calls in a timely and professional manner, customers remember being treated with understanding and respect. Peoria, Illinois-based AFFINA is well acquainted with this concept. In addition to traditional inbound contact center services, AFFINA offers mail and fulfillment services, data analysis, Internet services and customer interaction consulting.

“We develop customized customer-touch solutions for clients using a unique blend of people, process and technology,” explains Enterprise Systems Architect John May, AFFINA. “We take calls for other companies, provide technical support, handle inbound mail and perform fulfillment functions. Reliable data-storage and retrieval capabilities from HP are at the heart of just about everything we do.”

Whether AFFINA’s clients’ customers communicate via phone, e-mail, Web chat or white mail, AFFINA responds with consistency, accuracy and efficiency. To add value along the way, AFFINA collects and consolidates customer data to provide comprehensive analytics, which improve target marketing, enhance revenue and increase customer satisfaction.

To meet objectives such as these, AFFINA depends on HP storage-area network (SAN) technology. “HP StorageWorks SAN technology provides sophisticated and systematic configurations for disk connectivity, circumventing the prior limitations we experienced with direct-attached storage,” says May. “For example, the SAN fabric allows us to connect each node to a large number of storage devices, making it easier to allocate capacity to individual applications and boosting the versatility of our storage platform.”

targeting the right storage vendor

May works in AFFINA’s infrastructure group, which manages all inbound telephony operations. His department uses 125 HP ProLiant servers running Microsoft® Windows® NT, 15 HP K-class and L-class servers running HP-UX, and several Sun Solaris systems. “As more of our servers became critical, we decided to fine tune our storage strategy,” says May. “HP helped build the case for SAN technology by explaining its potential to improve the reliability and performance of our information systems. The HP sales team did a good job of relating the technical features of HP StorageWorks SAN technology to our crucial business objectives of high quality customer service and customer-relationship management.”

According to May, AFFINA also considered CLARiiON SAN solutions from EMC Corporation, but the vendor couldn’t effectively justify the cost of its storage products. “Both the price point and reliability sold us on HP StorageWorks solutions,” emphasizes May.

AFFINA purchased HP StorageWorks Enterprise Virtual Array (EVA) technology, a virtual RAID storage solution designed for enterprise-scale applications, along with HP SAN-implementation services. May has worked with many vendors during his 18-year career in information technology (IT), but cannot recall a smoother implementation: “HP played a major role in implementing the SAN. HP Services’ consultants were flexible enough to work in our unique 24x7 environment, and the implementation went exactly as planned. HP provided detailed proposals, quickly and accurately answered all our questions and demonstrated expertise in the areas of most concern to us. They took the time to educate our staff and ensure excellent knowledge-transfer, so we could efficiently maintain our environment following the implementation.”
Once HP engineers installed and configured the HP StorageWorks EVA solution, they helped AFFINA devise a strategy for migrating business-critical data from six HP ProLiant servers to the EVA SAN environment. The servers were running a Microsoft Exchange mail-and-messaging environment, several Microsoft SQL Server databases and two phone-support systems. “Here again, HP demonstrated its extraordinary expertise,” says May. “They laid out the project beautifully with all of the deployment steps, schedules, risk assessments, safeguards and so forth. HP helped us optimize the application servers for the HP StorageWorks EVA SAN environment, and then worked with our IT department to chart a course for integrating its SAN technology with our remaining servers. Ultimately, we plan to incorporate most of our remaining Microsoft® Windows® NT servers and all of our HP-UX servers into the EVA environment.”

capturing the high-density storage market
The motivation for the all-out migration to the HP StorageWorks EVA system is obvious: when it comes to meeting demanding application requirements, this flexible storage solution is hard to top. The system’s controller pair will support up to 240 Fibre Channel disk drives at transfer rates of 2GB per second. Moreover, with support for both 36GB and 72GB drives, EVA is one of the highest density disk-storage solutions in the industry. HP StorageWorks EVA is also one of the most reliable, thanks to a redundant architecture, which eliminates single points of failure between the servers and storage devices. For example, each controller has a pair of Fiber Channel host ports. Should a path failure occur, data flows over an alternate path to the controller. Additionally, EVA includes redundant cooling and power supplies, and the IT staff can change or upgrade most components without taking down the entire system.

The blazing speed and fail-safe operation of EVA is already making a difference where it matters most: in the response time of AFFINA’s key software applications. “The HP StorageWorks EVA system delivers substantial performance improvements to our Microsoft Exchange environment, much to the delight of our e-mail users,” says May.

EVA also accelerates important system-administration functions, as an internal benchmark test revealed. “Before implementing the HP StorageWorks EVA system, it took 8,995 seconds to compress our personal information files,” reports May. “With EVA in place, it took 4,339 seconds. This dramatically shortens the cycle of downtime for these key servers.”

The high-density packaging and concise documentation of HP StorageWorks EVA also impressed May. HP packs up to 12TB of disk storage in approximately 5.9 square feet, which preserves valuable floor space. Additionally, since the system is easy to understand, manage and use, the staff can quickly adapt the platform without disrupting operations. “HP StorageWorks systems help us respond rapidly to new business demands, because they are easy to expand,” he says. “We reduced our staff from four administrators to three, yet manage more storage capacity than ever before.”

retaining a lead in the industry
AFFINA’s unique, technology-oriented approach to customer acquisition and retention continues to drive sales and win customer loyalty. The company bases its approach on nearly 30 years of experience in customer-relationship management and millions of interactions with clients’ consumers. May believes AFFINA’s success is partly attributable to its ability to react quickly to marketplace changes: “We are often asked to complete major IT projects in a very short time span. For example, we recently deployed Microsoft BizTalk software, and we were able to use the HP StorageWorks EVA volume expansion feature to quickly allocate the necessary storage capacity from existing disks drives.”

AFFINA is upgrading 50 servers to the Microsoft .NET environment, and considering HP Services to help with this initiative. May says he values HP’s broad base of experience with servers, storage equipment, interconnects and applications. Along with the EVA, AFFINA has an HP Surestore Virtual Array 7400 system and an HP StorageWorks network-attached storage (NAS) device. “We are thinking about consolidating the HP Surestore Virtual Array 7400 with the EVA into a single SAN fabric – once again, with help from HP Services,” concludes May. “This will give us even more flexibility to allocate our storage resources as needed.”
business results:

- HP SAN technology boosts the reliability, capacity, performance and availability of AFFINA’s information systems and key business applications.
- The HP StorageWorks Enterprise Virtual Array system reduces the time for file compression by more than 50 percent and speeds up important system administration functions.
- HP StorageWorks management tools make it easy to add capacity in response to new business demands.
- The consolidated storage environment enables three system administrators to do the work of four – even though they manage substantially more storage capacity.
- Reliance on HP Services helps improve productivity and deliver quality IT solutions quickly.

what makes it work:

hardware:

- HP StorageWorks Enterprise Virtual Array system
- HP Surestore Virtual Array 7400
- HP StorageWorks network-attached storage (NAS)
- two Compaq StorageWorks SAN Switch 16
- two HP StorageWorks 2800 switch
- HP OpenView SAN Management Appliance
- HP 200 Surestore Tape Library
- HP 460 Surestore Tape Library
- HP Ultrium 230 LTO Tape Library
- 125 HP ProLiant servers, including models DL380 and DL580
- HP K- and L-class servers (13)

software:

- HP StorageWorks Snapshot/Snapclone for Virtual Controller Software
- HP OpenView HSV Element Manager
- HP OpenView Resource Monitor
- HP OpenView Secure Manager VA
- HP Business Copy VA
- HP-UX operating system
- Microsoft Windows NT
- Microsoft Windows 2000
- Microsoft .NET
- Microsoft SQL Server
- Microsoft Exchange
- Microsoft BizTalk
- Lotus Notes
- Oracle database

hp services:

- SAN-implementation services (design, installation)
- Microsoft .NET migration consulting and implementation services
- Extended hardware and software warranty services
- Technical support