Dependent on Continuous Data Availability, Major Credit Union Service Provider Chooses iTera's Echo^2 High Availability

The last of a company's tolerance for system maintenance downtime is usually gone forever when Internet access is provided to customers and vendors. That's exactly what happened at CU*Answers, a major credit union software provider and IT service bureau, with the unveiling of Internet banking services to its credit unions.

About CU*Answers

CU*Answers is a credit union owned service provider supporting 130+ credit unions in 13 states, that in turn serve nearly a million credit union members and handle $3.5 billion in credit union assets. Credit union clients range in size from 1,000 to 48,000 members. Headquartered in Kentwood, Michigan, CU*Answers employs a large staff of technical and administrative professionals with decades of combined experience serving the credit union and data processing service industries.

At CU*Answers, the quest for high availability didn't begin just because the downtime window for system maintenance tasks was lost. Auditors had been pressuring the company for some time to implement measures to ensure 24x7 availability. That's because it was estimated that in the event of a system failure or site disaster, it would take 24 to 48 hours to restore current backup tapes at a 'hot-site' and get the business back online. Plus, all transactions and file updates that had occurred since the creation of the last tape backups would be lost and unrecoverable. All of this, of course, would be a real problem for the credit unions who depend on CU*Answers, and the nearly 1 million account holders that the credit unions serve.

The search for the right iSeries high availability solution began with CU*Answers' CIO Jody Karnes meeting with Scott Collins of MK & Associates (MKA). MKA was the IBM reseller for CU*Answers, and was also a reseller for a high availability vendor other than iTera. But after Collins' meeting with Karnes, he knew that CU*Answers had some unique needs—the biggest being a mandatory requirement to successfully execute a role-swap to the backup iSeries every 30 days to test and verify the process. Collins knew the high availability solution he currently sold could reliably mirror data, but he wasn't happy about what he had heard about its ability to reliably perform role-swaps.

Says Karnes, "We talked to companies using a variety of high availability products, and many of these had spent over a year working with the product, yet had still not been able to successfully do a role swap. The biggest problem was a lack of confidence in the completeness of the data on their backup system."

Continues Karnes, "For us, the role swap process had to work reliably; therefore, we intended to test the role swap frequently. High availability won't do us any good if we're not confident that we are ready for the worst."

It so happens that MKA sells MAPICS software and MAPICS also has a partnering agreement with iTera, which is how Collins came across Echo² High Availability. Collins and Karnes' first impressions of Echo² were good. Says Karnes, "It was apparent that since iTera came to the market later than other HA solutions, the company was able to offer some very innovative features, particularly its native remote journaling capabilities."

Remote journaling is known to provide faster, more reliable replication and doesn't add the overhead to the production system like other HA solutions that don't use remote journaling. In addition, Echo² has significant autonomic features that mean far less time for monitoring and managing the system, as well as making role swaps more easy and reliable.

The more that Collins and Karnes looked at Echo² and talked to iTera's customers—especially customers successfully using the role swap process—the more impressed they became. Continues Karnes, "Echo² High Availability clearly looked easier to implement and manage. In addition to the reliability of the role swap process, the daily amount of management time required for high availability was a big concern. In our evaluation, iTera assured us that it would take less than an hour each day to monitor and manage replication with Echo²."

CU*Answers decided to purchase Echo² and installed it on their 4-way iSeries 825 that delivers its software and processing services via a service bureau/ASP model to over 100 individual credit unions across the United States. These credit unions use CU*Answers' CU*BASE software for credit unions, which runs on individual LPARs and is delivered via the Internet. The model 825 handles over 2000 devices and almost 1 million credit union customers, processing on average over 30 million daily transactions.

Within 90 days of inking the contract, Echo² was fully installed and configured, users were trained, replication was successfully running on all necessary objects, and the first role-swap was successfully executed. "Based on what we heard about the time it typically takes to implement HA solutions, our expectations for full implementation were greatly exceeded," says Karnes.

System Analyst, Jim Berryman, was involved in the implementation of Echo² and now oversees the management of HA at CU*Answers. Berryman happened to work with another brand of high availability software at a previous job, and when asked about the main difference between Echo² and the previous solution, his answer was short and sweet: "It works." Continues Berryman, "With the other high availability solution, it was not unusual to see 10 to 15 minutes of latency [transactions not sent to the backup system], while with Echo² I have never seen transactions queued and waiting to be sent to the backup. In addition, I have found iTera's tech support people to be very sharp and responsive."

Says Karnes "Since Echo² indeed takes only about an hour a day to monitor and manage, we were extremely pleased that we didn't have to hire someone new to maintain, run and audit our HA. This was part of the sales pitch we got from iTera and I am happy that the product lived up to the company's claim."

Today, CU*Answers tests the role-swap process each month on a Sunday morning. Because their backup machine is a model 270, it is clearly smaller than their production model 825; therefore, CU*Answers cannot currently test the role swap on other days of the week due to workload volumes on those days. However, a new model 825 is planned to replace their backup machine in the near future, which means this will no longer be a restricting factor. In addition, the new machine will be located off-site at a new facility being built across town. During their Sunday role swap tests, CU*Answers has only one credit union that is open, and of course, all Internet banking services are available. Regardless, during each test, customers are able to use the system without interruption while CU*Answers stays on the backup machine for as long as 6 hours at a time.

Says Karnes, "During my evaluation of solutions from other high availability vendors, I didn't talk to any of their customers that were successfully testing the rollover process each month like we do today." She continues, "It takes about 10 to 15 minutes to complete the rollover, which amounts to about 2 minutes to execute the actual rollover and the remainder of the time to move communications, the Internet portal, and a multitude of interfaces. Once we get our new model 825 machine online as our backup, our goal is to test the role swap any day of the week and have it be completely transparent to our users. Considering the success of our monthly exercises so far, we are confident that we will accomplish this with Echo²."

Since Echo² was installed, Collins has actually gone to work for CU*Answers. His first order of business was to set up an IBM reseller business unit to supply iSeries hardware to credit unions along with their CU*BASE software. In addition, CU*Answers has also become an enthusiastic cross-industry reseller of Echo² High Availability. Says Collins, "Because of the success of Echo² on our system, we are very excited to offer Echo² and other iSeries solutions to credit unions as well as companies outside of our traditional marketplace. We have also begun an initiative with iTera to offer Echo² in an ASP environment in which Echo² High Availability will be installed on the client's production system to replicate critical data to a partition on one of our iSeries servers here at CU*Answers. We will handle all of the system management, support and training." Continues Collins, "Our overall infrastructure—designed to secure the financial records of almost 1 million people—coupled with the strength of the iTera solution allows us to offer tremendous value to our clients."

It is clear that iTera and its Echo² High Availability solution has exceeded the expectations of CU*Answers with the very unexpected benefit of starting a new business initiative to provide affordable, reliable high availability to all kinds of companies.

Strategic Business Systems
17 South Franklin Turnpike
Ramsey, NJ 07446
201-327-9400
info@sbsusa.com
www.sbsusa.com
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iTera Authorized Reseller