Nimble Group

Following a major corporate acquisition, Nimble Group’s call center team expanded nearly tenfold. The company needed a more scalable telephony solution, and worked with Clarotech, a SUSE® Partner, to deploy a free, open source application called Asterisk, running on SUSE Linux Enterprise Server.

Overview
Nimble Group is one of South Africa’s leading credit management companies, providing a wide range of services including outsourced receivable management, collection services and credit risk consulting. Based in Cape Town, the company is experiencing massive growth, and has recently opened a new 800-seat call center in Brickfield.

Challenge
To capitalize on opportunities in the fast-moving South African credit sector, Nimble Group adopted an ambitious expansion strategy. Following the acquisition of Norman Bissett & Associates in early 2010, the company’s market share increased significantly, and its total number of call center staff rose from around 100 to more than 600 in less than five months.

“Growing so rapidly created a number of challenges, both operationally and from the ICT perspective,” said Marius Smith, Chief Information Officer at Nimble Group. “First, to house all the new employees, we moved to a much larger facility in Brickfield, Cape Town. Next, we had to enhance our telephony platform so that it could not only handle the increased demand, but would also be capable of scaling to meet the needs of future growth.”

Since the majority of Nimble Group’s business is conducted via its call centers, any downtime in the telephony solution would affect both customer service and revenues. As a result, the new solution also needed to be highly reliable.

Solution
Nimble Group had already enjoyed some success with Asterisk, an open source telephony solution. The company decided to build a new infrastructure that would support a larger-scale deployment of this software.

“In South Africa, competition is cut-throat, so there is always a great deal of emphasis on minimizing costs and increasing efficiency,” said Smith. “Since most software companies operate in dollars or euros, their pricing models seem extortionate to many South African companies. As a result, there is generally a much wider adoption of open source software—and with the right support, it is a very viable strategy.”

MARIUS SMITH
Chief Information Officer
Nimble Group

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Nimble Group at a glance:
A leading credit risk management company

- Industry and Location
  Banking and Finance, South Africa

- Products and Services
  SUSE Linux Enterprise Server
  SUSE Linux Enterprise High Availability Extension

- Results
  + Supported rapid business growth with a highly scalable telephony solution
  + Deployed advanced clustering technologies to maximize availability
  + Used open source software to achieve cost savings of 75 percent versus comparable proprietary solutions
“Compared to proprietary telephony solutions from other vendors, the combination of Asterisk and SUSE Linux Enterprise Server gives us the same level of functionality and performance for just 25 percent of the cost.”

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The IT team at Nimble Group worked with Clarotech, a SUSE Partner, to design and deploy the new infrastructure. Clarotech recommended that the Asterisk solution should run on SUSE Linux Enterprise Server.

“We moved from our existing single server architecture to an Intel Modular Server, which has six separate compute modules and a built-in SAN,” said Smith. “One module runs the database for Asterisk, one handles incoming calls, and the remaining four are split into two dual-node clusters that manage the thousands of outgoing calls we make every day.”

The clustering is handled by SUSE Linux Enterprise High Availability Extension, which ensures that even if one compute module fails, the Asterisk application will continue running on the other module—practically eliminating the risk of downtime for call center staff.

“Our business runs on telephony, so it was critical to get this new solution up and running as quickly as possible,” said Smith. “The Clarotech team has a good understanding of our business as well as excellent technical skills. They deserve a lot of credit for delivering the project on time; even when delays on the hardware side held up the implementation, they made sure the deadline didn’t slip.”

Results
The combination of the Asterisk software, SUSE Linux Enterprise Server and SUSE Linux Enterprise High Availability Extension gives Nimble Group a flexible and mature telephony solution that optimizes operations while providing the required reliability and availability. The scalability of SUSE Linux Enterprise Server provides enough headroom on the new hardware to support further business expansion in the near future.

“Aside from a few teething problems, which Clarotech helped us resolve very quickly, we haven’t had a single issue with the new solution since the go-live,” said Smith. “The SUSE Linux Enterprise High Availability Extension gives us a great deal of confidence that we would be able to handle a hardware failure without any disruption to the business.”

Since Asterisk and Linux are open source, software costs are low; and the efficiency of SUSE Linux Enterprise Server means that it can deliver a good level of performance with less investment in hardware than many other operating systems would require.

“Compared to proprietary telephony solutions from other vendors, the combination of Asterisk and SUSE Linux Enterprise Server gives us the same level of functionality and performance for just 25 percent of the cost,” said Smith. “We have also demonstrated that the solution can scale to support very large call centers without any problems. Other companies that are looking at IP telephony should take note of this solution, because we’ve proved that an open source option can be just as reliable and efficient as the major vendors’ offerings, at a fraction of the cost.”