

AMERISTAR

"With iTERA HA, the right team and the right build in the hardware, we successfully merged five servers with very little impact and just six hours of downtime each. The virtual role swap capability of iTERA HA really proved itself, and made us comfortable that core applications were working and the merge would be successful."

Jessica Miller, Senior System Engineer, Ameristar Casinos Inc.

Business Profile

Company Name:
Ameristar Casinos, Inc.

Location:
Las Vegas, Nevada (U.S.)

Industry:
Gaming Entertainment

Annual Revenue:
Approx. 1 Billion US

Employees:
Approximately 8,500

Business Environment:

- Founded in 1954 in Jackpot, Nevada and publicly held since 1993
- Portfolio of eight casinos in seven markets
- Properties located in Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, and Nevada
- Consolidated net revenues of approximately \$294 million in the fourth quarter of 2008

Implementation Team:
Ameristar, in close partnership with Agilysys NV, LLC

Vision Solutions Products:

- iTERA HA
- Vision Director

Critical Issue

With a growing number of leased end-of-life servers located in multiple states, Ameristar wanted to streamline its systems. A consolidation including purchasing new IBM Power Systems servers was targeted to reduce costs, speed and simplify processes for users and for the IT staff, and facilitate future company acquisitions. To limit planned downtime and avoid the negative business impact of unplanned outages, the team made high availability and smooth role swaps essential elements as they worked with Agilysys to design the new environment.

Results

- Assured Business continuity, yearly downtime reduced from 540 to 32 hours
- Hardware costs reduced 43 percent over three years through consolidation on owned rather than leased hardware
- Ability to integrate Power Systems applications from newly acquired properties in weeks rather than months
- Consolidation project simplified by mirroring and by testing with virtual Role Swaps
- Rapid and smooth enterprise system role swaps performed semi-annually for business continuity testing and SOX best practices.
- Minimum HA administrative overhead: software intuitive and easy to learn
- Applications and users experiencing significant performance improvements

Technologies

- Vision Solutions: iTERA™ HA and Director™
- One Enterprise-scale IBM® Power Systems server running all live environments
- One IBM Power Systems server as real-time backup
- Agilysys: Lodging Management System®, LMS Cash®, LMS ResNet™, LMS ShowGate®, Stratton Warren System (SWS)
- Kronos iSeries Timekeeper
- CMS/400 Casino Management
- Infinium Financial Management Suite (FMS) and Human Capital Management (HCM)

Business Challenge

Since its founding more than 50 years ago, Ameristar Casinos, Inc. has grown into a leading gaming and entertainment company. As the company expanded, additional servers were added and acquired, resulting in a systems infrastructure spread across numerous states. "Our current systems were nearing capacity and a majority of the hardware was approaching obsolescence: it was clear that to prepare for growth, both organic and through acquisitions, we needed a 'technology refresh'," said Ameristar Casinos' CIO Sheleen Quish.

"Working with the Agilysys team, we outlined a plan for newer technology, consolidation, and business continuity assurance," Quish stated. "In addition to performance improvements, we targeted maintenance cost savings. These are valuable benefits in a slower economy, and in the future when Ameristar sees opportunities for growth, the IT systems will be ready to support it effectively."

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Solution

The Agilysys Technical Services Team and their application specialists worked closely with Ameristar Senior IT personnel on the consolidation project. Agilysys has extensive experience with architecture and infrastructure design for consolidations and played a key role from initial project scoping through final testing.

“Ameristar had never experienced a system failure, so high availability and disaster recovery were not top of mind. Since some of our critical systems are hosted on the iSeries, we knew that we would be expected to recover immediately from any system outage, but we did not have a tested plan in place to do so,” said Jessica Miller, Senior System Engineer Ameristar Casinos Inc. “Ultimately, iTERA HA solved two problems: it provided us with high availability and disaster recovery and it made our consolidation project attainable and successful with very little user downtime.”

I had previous role-swap experience with iTERA HA and knew it would be easy for everyone to learn, but we did conduct in-depth product comparisons before we chose it as the permanent HA solution for Ameristar,” Miller added. “When we learned that iTERA HA could do “virtual” role swaps, we were convinced.”

“With the planning and implementation assistance from Agilysys and iTERA HA and Director from Vision, we had all the right elements in place to make this a success. I think iTERA HA is tremendous: the virtual role swaps helped us find and resolve many significant problems that could have been show stoppers,” Miller said.

When the consolidation project was in the final planning stages, Ameristar acquired a property that was already running iTERA HA on two aging servers. “Ameristar had owned the new company only three months, so we were unfamiliar with their Power Systems environment and the timing made it impossible for us to fully evaluate their iTERA HA implementation. So the project team decided to use a dual replication configuration to segregate the overall project from this merge,” Miller explained.

“The merges went very smoothly and quickly. Overall it was a turnkey implementation: installing, mirroring, testing, and then the merge. Everything went smoothly with only minimal impact to the business during off-peak hours,” Miller said.

In total, five servers were consolidated to just two that mirror with iTERA HA. To support all of Ameristar’s multiple properties in multiple states, one primary server runs all of the company’s live environments with no partitioning and a real-time backup is located in another state. In subsequent months, one server will be partitioned in order to house development and V6R1 testing.

Eliminating leased servers and purchasing two new servers for the consolidation, Ameristar reduced Power Systems costs by 43 percent over three years. The corporate IT staff can handle the consolidated systems, reducing the costs of outsourcing and training. “The year before the consolidation, there were 540 hours of outage for OS upgrades and PTFs for all the servers, and now we are down to four eight-hour role swaps a year,” Miller said.

Vision Director technology is also running on both Ameristar servers. “Within the first two weeks we cleaned a significant number of files and got a lot of space back,” Miller said. “We see huge potential for Vision Director as we use it more extensively.”

“Before the consolidation project we had eight servers that had never been recovered. There was real potential for downtime and even data loss during the project. With iTERA HA we solved that problem. And now Ameristar has a tested and proven HA solution in place that is faster and more efficient. I am confident we can recover any of our iSeries servers quickly should a disaster occur,” Miller concluded.

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