As IT technology has evolved, it might seem counterintuitive to put resources behind maintaining and modernizing legacy IT systems like IBM i (iSeries®). But many companies today still rely on this technology or have a heterogeneous IT environment, in which an IBM i® server serves as the backbone of its business information systems.

In these mixed environments, an IBM i server typically resides alongside a mix of Windows, Linux, Unix and other technologies—with the IBM i often containing the company's most important information. After all, these businesses have invested heavily through the years in their IBM i system to support critical business processes and the technology has grown with the company.

First Option Inc. has been in the thick of the IBM i world for more than two decades. With offices in Boston and Phoenix, First Option serves customers across a broad range of industries including software, financial, telecommunications, nonprofit, asset management, textile, retail and legal. Starting out providing Report Program Generator (RPG) and iSeries programing services for businesses large and small, First Option has expanded through the years and now offers a fully integrated cloud accounting suite, a centralized IBM i monitoring tool, IBM i application hosting and disaster recovery services to ensure their customers' information works for them all the time.

But they didn't do it alone.

First Option expands IBM iSeries product and services portfolio with mindSHIFT by its side

Challenge

When First Option began in 1995, it was all about connectivity. It was about keeping businesses connected to the network and internal business applications as well as the outside world through email and the Internet.

Events soon after like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina cast an even greater spotlight on connectivity. Businesses in terror-worn New York City and the water-logged south relied more than ever on outsourced IT partners to get onto their networks, access business information and communicate with colleagues and customers in the aftermath of tragedy.

But as the years progressed and many fly-by-night IT partners came and went, connectivity became commonplace. Customers wanted—and expected—more.

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>
> Paul Fuller
> Owner
> First Option Inc.
> Cave Creek, Arizona

Over the years, First Option had been building its portfolio of outsourced IT services. By 2001, its consulting division was working with customers to enable their RPG needs by creating java-based applications and deploying them on a variety of HTTP and application services. Applications ranged from basic XML document interfaces to more complete web services and then to feature-rich applications across the web. Sometimes, the RPG legacy code was enlisted. Other times, legacy software was replaced.

Six years ago, First Option saw an opportunity to broaden its scope even further by expanding into hosted services. Yet they didn't have the space to do it on their own. With its head in the cloud before it became the industry norm, First Option wanted to continue to lead with service offerings for IBM i network environments.

"We needed an outsource partner who could work with us and maintain 24/7/365 service level agreements—one who had the knowledge and ability to support the network and IBM i for applications in the cloud," said Paul Fuller, owner of First Option Inc.

First Option also wanted to work with just one vendor. They didn't want a variety of vendors handling the variety of IT technologies.

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Solution

It didn't take long for First Option to discover mindSHIFT, one of the largest IT outsourcing and cloud-service providers. A Ricoh company, mindSHIFT provides a wide range of managed services for IBM i Power Systems™ servers including AS/400, iSeries and System i. mindSHIFT had been serving businesses for more than 10 years at the time and had built a solid reputation.

A partnership quickly followed. mindSHIFT took over managing First Option's data centers and soon after, First Option shifted the management of its production and development centers to mindSHIFT as well. The big leap forward in the relationship came when First Option asked mindSHIFT to take a look at an

IBM i monitoring tool it was developing. First Option envisioned a simple, cost-effective dashboard that made the power of iSeries functionality more readily accessible to users with varying levels of training and in many different environments. First Option also wanted a dashboard that alerted users to only the essential things they needed to know via email alerts when those issues became imminent.

> " We've never experienced downtime with mindSHIFT, even when a hurricane came through. "

First Option and mindSHIFT collaborated to develop IBM i Watchdog by First Option—a centralized IBM i (iSeries, AS 400) monitoring solution. This monitoring tool provides a user-friendly interface for key system health threshold alert definitions, day, time and duration to suspend monitoring to accommodate scheduled maintenance, customized email groups for routing information and inquiry messages to a pre-defined support team. mindSHIFT hosts the central server for IBM i Watchdog.

"You can drop mindSHIFT into any situation and they can quickly figure it out," said Fuller. "They have the depth of knowledge because they've dealt with it all. I consider mindSHIFT a part of First Option."

IBM i Watchdog started off as a basic monitoring tool used with 10 clients but has evolved over time to its current fourth generation version, adding more types of configurations and requirements depending on the needs of First Option's customers. Today, this tool is used to monitor more than 70 systems around the world. And with mindSHIFT's capability to support Windows and networking environments, First Option has been able to gain traction with larger environments and larger clients.

"We process millions of transactions a week with IBM i Watchdog," said Fuller. "mindSHIFT worked with us to make this tool very scalable so we were able to grow."

As the relationship has evolved, so too has First Option's reliance on mindSHIFT for the infrastructure to handle the increasingly SaaS side of the business. mindSHIFT has also been an integral partner to First Option as it expanded its financial offerings with a fully integrated cloud accounting suite. Bottom line, First Option customers know they have a reliable team and IT infrastructure that allows them to focus on their core business.

"We've never experienced downtime with mindSHIFT, even when a hurricane came through," said Fuller.

Results

First Option just signed a two-year extension contract with mindSHIFT and is planning to add a development back-up site at a secure data center in Minnesota. mindSHIFT offers both dedicated and cloud-based high availability (HA) and disaster recovery (DR) solutions to help protect IBM i Power System environments from data loss.

Today, mindSHIFT handles all of the hardware service on the First Option system, manages its infrastructure, mans its call center, conducts full backups and performs other operational functions. While technically behind the scenes to its customers, First Option knows mindSHIFT has been an integral partner for much of its progress—providing and managing the backbone IT infrastructure to help them grow and succeed.

Leveraging synergies, containing costs
Both mindSHIFT and First Option understand that each of their businesses serve different functions in the IT world. And it works perfectly, with each complementing the other. On many occasions, mindSHIFT has even recommended First Option to its clients that need development work.

On the cost side of the partnership, not having to purchase equipment or IBM customer support has been a big advantage. First Option leases its hardware from mindSHIFT and has just one set monthly cost to pay.

"We really don't want to be on the hardware side of things because that's not our focus," said Fuller. "This is something we've been able to leverage well with mindSHIFT."

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Further potential for collaboration
When Fuller moved to Arizona, he sensed the absence of a users group in the area for IBM i. That sparked talks between First Option and mindSHIFT of working together to start an IBM i networking collaborative in Phoenix where users could feed off one another, share interests and talk about what's going on with the technology.

If this comes together, mindSHIFT will no longer be largely behind the scenes. First Option and mindSHIFT would stand shoulder-to-shoulder to advance the use of IBM i and take their relationship to the next stage.

Find out what we can do for you.

www.mindSHIFT.com

Phone: 877-227-5054

Email: info@mindSHIFT.com