Gerber Life Insurance gains business resiliency on a budget

Client Profile

For 50 years, young families have turned to Gerber Life as a trusted source for life insurance and related offerings. The business has grown steadily over the years, along with its corresponding technology requirements. The IT environment — once primarily on a mainframe — now encompasses a distributed infrastructure running dozens of critical applications, powering interactions and digital transactions with customers and agents. Gerber Life recognized the need for a contemporary disaster recovery approach for this distributed infrastructure, and turned to 11:11 Systems, formerly Sungard Availability Services (Sungard AS) and 11:11 Managed Recovery, which provides the people, processes, and infrastructure needed to recover critical applications and quickly restore business operations.

Challenges

Protecting a growing, distributed environment

In recent years, Gerber Life has focused primarily on deploying new digital applications to better serve its customers. Key applications include a web-based product distribution system, a portal to serve independent insurance agents, Gerber's contact center, and interactive voice response (IVR) systems—which together handle more than a million customer inquiries per year for sales and service. For disaster recovery, Gerber Life thought it best to outsource recovery to a third-party service provider.

"To keep pace with the business, we deployed a new digital infrastructure and built a robust and modern application portfolio," explains Tony Cirigliano, Gerber Life IT Manager. "Many of our business applications had become mission critical, and we recognized we needed a better disaster recovery plan in place."

"We reached a point in our journey where we recognized that our digital business infrastructure had grown beyond what our technology team could recover within our targeted recovery time objectives," says Eric Bulis, SVP of Operations and CIO of Gerber Life Insurance. "We needed to do two things: recover from a disaster in a short time frame, and manage the associated costs. Engaging a managed service DR provider was really the only option that made sense from a business perspective." Gerber Life's IT team evaluated vendors and decided to contract with [11:11].

"[11:11] has proven itself in terms of fulfilling our expectations for cost, scope of services, and delivery," says Bulis.

CHALLENGES

- Outgrown disaster recovery plan
- Cost management

SOLUTIONS

- 11:11 Managed Recovery
- 11:11 Discovery and Dependency Mapping Service
- 11:11 Colocation

BENEFITS

- Fast recovery, reduced risk for business-critical applications
- Fully managed DR solution minimizes demands on internal staff
- Predictable recovery costs for a more responsive and effective DR framework
- Production and recovery environments in better sync for improved business performance
- DR testing to achieve 24-hour Recovery Time Objective (RTO)

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> "When they say 'managed service', [11:11] means managing the whole process, from top to bottom. Don't let the procurement process keep you from pursuing greater capability in risk management. This kind of expertise and capability is reasonable from a risk-adjusted perspective, and well worth it."
>
> **Eric Bulis**
> SVP of Operations and CIO Gerber Life Insurance Company

Minimizing risk with a managed recovery program

Today, as part of 11:11 Managed Recovery, [11:11 Systems] has contractual responsibility for Gerber Life's IT disaster recovery program. [11:11]'s people and expertise combine to meet Gerber Life's specific requirements for data protection and system recovery. The service includes extensive planning, process design, and testing. Continuing program management ensures full recoverability, even with constant IT changes over time.

Gerber Life established high-level goals for the MRP service: to resume servicing customers within one day following a disaster, and to resume sales and other operations within two days following a disaster.

"[11:11] came to the fore with the right kind of project management and engineering talent," says Bulis. "They really understood how to partner with us and collaborate, asked the right questions, and got into the details of what was required for them to set up the managed services framework to recover our environment in the event of a disaster. They set up this framework efficiently and effectively, and it was a great part of our experience. It took the pressure off our team because [11:11] had a well-defined methodology to guide us."

Building resiliency for a distributed environment

Gerber Life has a significant number of servers supporting its development, test, and production environments. The MRP service covers these servers, most of which are virtualized, but with some clustered physical machines supporting Microsoft SQL Server databases.

Storage systems from NetApp reside in Gerber Life's data center. The data on these storage systems is now replicated using NetApp SnapMirror software transmitting to additional NetApp systems colocated in the [11:11] Philadelphia data center. Gerber Life worked with [11:11] to establish dedicated point-to-point connectivity between its data center location in Fremont, Michigan and [11:11]'s Philadelphia location to enable this near-real-time replication. This colocated storage satisfies data backup requirements and plays a central role in the Managed Recovery Program.
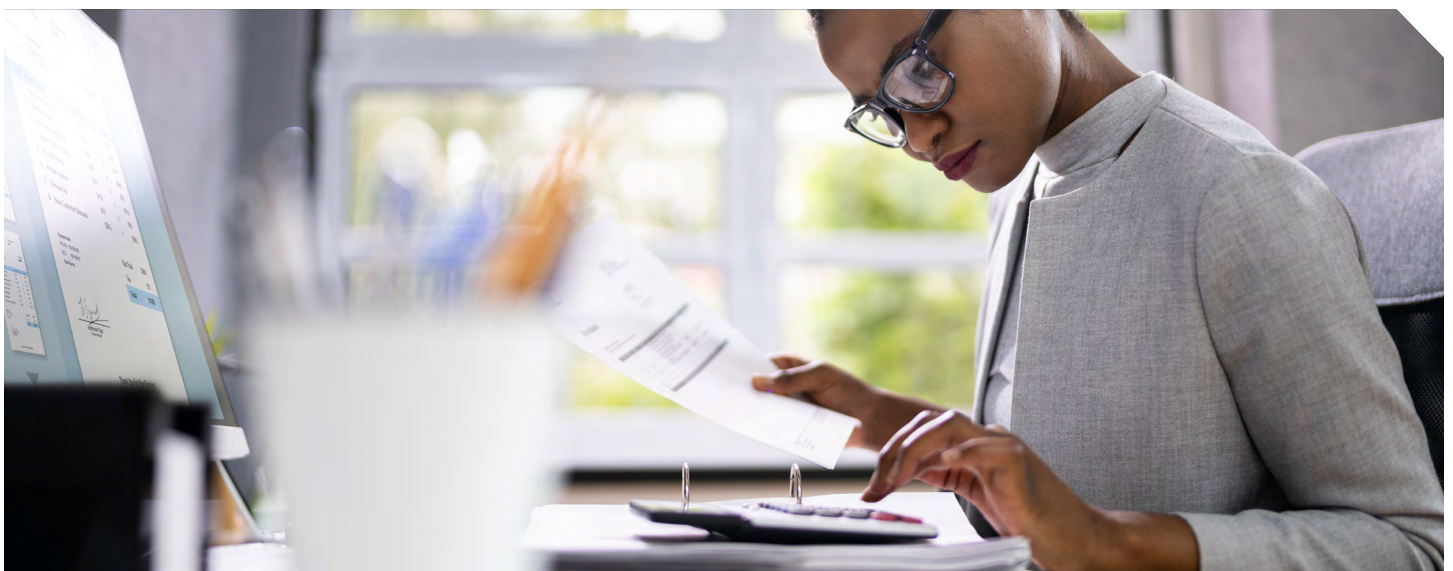
Recovery in action

In the event a disaster is declared, the [11:11 Systems'] team in Philadelphia has initiated detailed pre-planned procedures to build application servers configured to match the Gerber Life production environment. Thanks to this application discovery and dependency mapping (ADDM) software that monitors and captures changes on a regular basis, the [11:11] recovery configuration includes all updates for a more complete recovery.

[11:11] also connects this recovery infrastructure to the Gerber data already onsite at [11:11], links to the Gerber Life mainframe, where data is recovered by a different provider, and restores network connections to Gerber Life facilities so business operations can resume in a timely manner.

11:11 Managed Recovery recovery plan prioritizes applications that enable Gerber Life to service inquiries and claims for its existing customers — with a 24-hour Recovery Time Objective. Together, [11:11] and Gerber Life have conducted DR tests for key applications, as well as proof-of-concept demonstrations for additional capabilities yet to be deployed.

Bulis is pleased with the progress. "We were initially concerned about how much time and effort our team would need to put into the DR process because, frankly, with our primary focus being on supporting business growth, we didn't have the additional bandwidth," he says. "11:11 Systems, formerly Sungard AS, made it much easier than we expected. When they say, 'managed service,' they mean managing the whole service, from top to bottom, and they continue to do so for us."

Cirigliano adds, "We had gone down the road of having our own hardware available for recovery, but the reality is that, if we had a disaster, we just didn't have the manpower to restore all our data quickly. [11:11] has a larger array of hardware than we can economically keep on hand and we are impressed with its support team. They're an extension of our team, and we think of them that way."

Bulis has a view for executives on the fence about using internal DR capabilities or engaging a managed services provider. "Don't let the procurement process keep you from pursuing a significantly greater capability in this area of risk management," he says. "It would be devastating if a company was brought to its knees by a datacenter disaster because of poor planning and a lack of acceptance from a procurement standpoint. Paying for this kind of expertise and capability is reasonable from a risk-adjusted perspective, and well worth it."

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