

Data#3 Customer Story

Victoria State Emergency Service

*Decommissioning Legacy
Server Environment Cuts Risk for
Victoria State Emergency Service*

Data#3



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Objective

Victoria State Emergency Service (“VICSES”) is a volunteer-based organisation that provides emergency assistance services throughout Victoria. Following a migration from an original on-premises environment to the Microsoft Azure platform, the VICSES identified that 25 workloads ran on Windows Server 2008. Many workloads had been migrated “as is” from the original legacy physical servers, which had been in production for more than ten years. An upgrade was vital to prevent risk to the organisation.

Testimonial

“They’re authentic, and they understand who we are, their solutions are catered to our profile. Also, they’re flexible and adaptable – as the project changed, they were able to adjust themselves because they have the resourcing and commitment behind them.”

Silvia Silverii, Chief Information Officer,
Victoria State Emergency Services.

Industry Insight

- Decommissioned legacy Server 2008 workloads
- Deployed a new Server 2016 production environment
- Reduced security and application compatibility risk
- The new environment was deployed both on time and under budget
- Minimal business impact during transition
- Reduced burden on IT staff
- Reduced on-going costs to support legacy, end-of-life, operating systems
- The new solution ensures VICSES compliance with Victorian government requirements

Approach

In alignment with both government and internal procurement policies, VICSES embarked on a request for quotation process. As the incumbent managed service provider, Data#3 had a deep understanding of VICSES’ plans for the project, and outlined an alternative approach that would reduce organisational risk and amplify beneficial outcomes.

Solutions & Services

- ✓ Microsoft Azure
- ✓ Managed Services

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The Background

Victoria State Emergency Service (“VICSES”) is a volunteer-based organisation, providing emergency assistance to minimise the impact of emergencies and strengthen the community’s capacity to plan, respond and recover, when emergencies occur.

The VICSES has 149 units, 13 offices and 7 mobile command vehicles across the state of Victoria that must interact with the head office in Melbourne’s Southbank. They are in the process of modernising IT systems, and with end of support for Windows Server 2008 approaching, VICSES needed to ensure their technology was upgraded before the support expired.

The Challenge

Anyone who has seen VICSES step up to help communities grappling with natural disasters will know that the organisation knows how to respond to risk. While crews are highly trained in handling fire, flood and storms, VICSES CIO Silvia Silverii must focus on reducing risk across the organisation by ensuring maintenance of the VICSES server environment is up to date.

As a Statute Authority, VICSES is governed by a Board, which is accountable to the Minister for Emergency Services. Therefore, VICSES is required to comply with state government guidelines on IT policy. With a whole of government initiative underway to migrate from Windows Server 2008, VICSES was conscious that aging workloads, migrated from an on-premises environment to the cloud, would have to go.

The update required conformity to a strict schedule: with completion expected no later than December 2019, the small IT team had a challenging task ahead.

“I didn’t know if we would be able to do that project at the same time as supporting the organisation, if it was not completed before the reaching the height of the fire season. We knew that if we waited, we ran the risk of additional costs to the business,” explained Silverii.

IT Outcome

While some basic support options were available for Windows Server 2008 in Microsoft Azure, VICSES would not have realised the increased resilience and simpler management of the modernised 2016 version. The VICSES team developed a plan in which they would perform much of the upgrade work, aided by external application vendors.

“Data#3 were already our managed service provider, and I knew they were the ones with the most information about our environment. We had been working with Data#3 for four years already, and during that time we never had any significant issues or outages from them serving our environment in Azure. Given we had only six months to complete the project, it was a natural choice,” said Silverii.

After discussion with VICSES, the Data#3 team recommended an alternative approach that would reduce the burden on the small in-house IT team. The proposal reduced risk of servers failing in place after the upgrade, and this approach matched the VICSES emphasis on dependability. VICSES engaged Data#3 to build a new Windows Server and Citrix environment on Azure, with the VICSES team managing application migrations. Work commenced quickly, pressing ahead before what eventually turned out to be an especially severe 2019/20 bushfire season.

“We not only made the deadline, but we met it before we were in the height of the fire season, which is a critical season for emergency services,” confirmed Silverii.

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Business Outcome

The direct project cost of Data#3’s proposal was higher than the initial VICSES plan, in which more work would have been completed in-house. However, for the VICSES team, the saved time and effort of the internal workforce was a tangible benefit.

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Given the relatively short timing window before the oncoming bushfire season, VICSES opted to direct their highly skilled in-house team to focus on other critical tasks. After recognising Data#3 as essentially an extended part of the team, it was simply a matter of managing all IT resources where they could achieve the best overall result.

“Our in-house team would have been more stretched by managing this project in addition to other pressing tasks, and the likelihood of failure would have been higher. Given we are a small, nimble, intelligent team, the risk of missing our deadline was problematic.”

The project ran smoothly, with team experiencing no disruption to users as the upgrades were implemented. Importantly, in such a busy time, trust in your partner to get on with the job at hand is imperative.

“The way they managed the project was with endorsed autonomy. They went about and got it done almost unnoticed, which for me was a good sign for me. Our project manager served as a touchpoint, and Data#3’s ability to work autonomously meant our project manager could focus on other high priority tasks,” explained Silverii.

“The December deadline was met, and Data#3 completed their elements far before that. Data#3 managed the server upgrades, we did the application migrations, and they did the disposal.”

By early March, more than 3,500 fires had been contained or extinguished, with VICSES members joined by interstate and overseas counterparts to support local communities where over 1.5 million hectares of land had burned across Victoria. In this catastrophic event, communities throughout the state were helped by VICSES. As regional populations began the recovery, the world was hit by another crisis, in the form of the Coronavirus pandemic.

“We can’t make significant changes to systems with that kind of emergency going on, but Data#3 were instrumental in ensuring we were prepared and able to service our community during these catastrophic events,” said Silverii.

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Conclusion

Although few organisations could present such a dramatic example, the advantages of a strong Microsoft Service Provider relationship are evident. By creating a team atmosphere in which candour is welcomed, VICSES was able to reap a stronger result.

“We had a view about how to do the upgrade, we presented it to Data#3, and they helped us explore our options. They put forward a compelling case to take a different road that we had originally considered. Although we had concerns with our ability to get this update deployed as quickly as possible, Data#3 took the time to explain how we could maximise the value of our technology investment,” outlined Silverii.

“The difficulty shifted from our team to theirs, they would do the heavy lifting. We quickly learnt that we were making it harder on ourselves, by not leveraging off their expertise.”

While technical strength is a given, finding the right fit culturally is equally important, and this has been the case with Data#3, whose account and technical team won approval with VICSES.

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VICSES credits much of the relationship’s strength to account management that focuses on working together, rather than short-term transactional gain. The team acknowledged that Data#3’s willingness to understand a project, and explore other options to make a project succeed “cannot be underestimated”.

“As a CIO, having the account manager on top of the project, giving me weekly updates, meant I didn’t have to delve into detail or drill down into it.”

Alongside the guidance from fellow Victorian government agencies such as of the Department of Justice and Community Services, Emergency Management Victoria, Silverii also values the community of IT professionals among the emergency services in Victoria. Because they share many similar challenges, they frequently discuss the strengths of IT providers, and she says “reputation is everything” in this close-knit group.

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Data#3 and Microsoft

Since 1994, Data#3 has combined forces with Microsoft to help our customers adapt and grow. Today, we are Microsoft's largest Australian business partner with the highest level of competency across the Microsoft ecosystem. Our hundreds of accredited consultants are ready to help our customers deliver the digital future; from enhancing productivity and collaboration with Microsoft 365 and the latest Surface devices, to transforming business processes with Dynamics 365, to ensuring our customers get the most value from Azure cloud. Our scale and expertise enable our unparalleled support to customers selecting, deploying, managing and securing Microsoft applications, products and devices.

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Microsoft