Business insurance company NIP Group moves to Azure to simplify its infrastructure, improve security, and support remote work

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After 30 years of managing its own infrastructure, NIP Group had to decide between making costly upgrades or migrating to the cloud. Moving its IT infrastructure to Microsoft Azure proved to be a better decision than the company anticipated. In addition to simplifying IT management and improving security and compliance—a major benefit in the heavily regulated insurance industry—NIP transformed its workplace from fully on-site to fully remote, giving employees the flexibility to work from anywhere and expanding its talent pool nationwide. NIP continues to adopt new Microsoft cloud services to create an edge in a highly competitive industry.

In 2021, David Gramblicka, Senior Vice President of IT at NIP Group, faced a critical choice. The company's infrastructure—located at its Woodbridge, New Jersey, headquarters and colocated datacenter at Rackspace—was reaching the end of its useful life. Replacing it would require a significant investment. For several years, NIP had considered moving to the cloud to simplify operations and optimize costs but had hesitated to commit. "It was a very difficult decision because we were talking about moving 30 years' worth of servers and data to a brand-new virtual environment," Gramblicka explains.

Gramblicka's IT team was small, yet managed technology for NIP's 150 employees as well as two sister companies. Already stretched thin, he knew NIP's aggressive growth plans would bring even more challenges.

Making the right cloud decisions

Gramblicka weighed several possible cloud solutions, including hybrid, multicloud, and full migration. "There are pros and cons to the hybrid model," he explains. "But at the end of the day, you're still running, maintaining, and monitoring servers and resources much like a traditional datacenter. It almost doubles your work, and that didn't make sense for us."

He also rejected a multicloud structure, in part because he trusted Microsoft to be responsive and keep NIP up to date with technological advancements. NIP had been steadily adding services from Microsoft over the past four years, and, after consulting with his account team, Gramblicka decided it was time to migrate the entire infrastructure to Microsoft Azure. "Microsoft is getting more innovative and listening to what customers are asking for," he adds.

Technology standardization was a primary goal, but not the only one. Previously, the IT team had to manage solutions from multiple vendors. In addition to easing the IT burden, Azure would simplify work procedures. "It's not just about standardizing equipment and systems," Gramblicka explains. "It's about the employees. The user experience is so much better when you're using one vendor's software—for example, having multifactor authentication built into the platform, rather than teaching people to use a security token from a different company."

To transfer the 125 servers and more than 60 terabytes of data from NIP and one of the sister companies, NIP worked with Microsoft partner Inviso. "Inviso was outstanding and very agile. They never hesitated when we decided to make a change," Gramblicka says.

As a specialty insurance provider, NIP works with sensitive customer data and those customers expect full access to policy information and other NIP resources. Data loss or a major disruption would have a serious impact, which NIP's executive team wanted to avoid.

NIP IT director Angelo Cardenas, a key decision-maker in the migration project, had estimated it would take 12 months, but the Microsoft Success Team believed it could be done in three. With Inviso's expertise, the shortened timeline was accomplished with no data loss or downtime and NIP was able to reduce the number of its servers from 125 to 70.

"From the beginning, our partner equipped us with the knowledge, tools, and guidance needed for such an enormous undertaking. It helped ease any uncertainty or intimidation about the journey we were about to embark on," says Cardenas. "This also allowed us to shrink our original migration timeline by 75 percent. It's a true testament to not only the dedication of our entire migration team, but also the ease and flexibility of the Azure Cloud."

Supporting remote work

Gramblicka's IT team saw benefits from the speed and versatility of Azure almost immediately, including its ability to add or remove resources on demand and automate patching and updates. "Azure makes management easier and enables scalability," says NIP Cloud Engineer Hagar Elshentenawy. "It gives us options to choose software-as-a-service and infrastructure-as-a-service, something we wouldn't have had on-premises. I can host services anywhere in the world and have them up and running much faster."

Moving to Azure also brought an unexpected boon by supporting NIP's transition to remote work. Previously, all employees were office-based. Though the company had deployed a handful of desktop servers for snow days and other brief closures, it had no plans to expand their use. That changed when the onset of COVID-19 sent everyone home for over a year. NIP implemented Azure Virtual Desktop, which enables administrators to onboard new users in minutes instead of hours or days. NIP also found it worked much better than the company's previous remote desktop solution, which didn't operate consistently on the devices employees used. "Azure Virtual Desktop was a tremendous improvement for users. It's a true Windows 10 desktop experience for everyone," says Gramblicka.

Employees appreciated the flexibility of the virtual environment. "Azure Virtual Desktop simplifies life—you just log onto your desktop wherever you go," says Gramblicka. "We even had a user work on the beach for six weeks during COVID fully enabled with just a tablet and keyboard."

Though some employees have chosen to return to the office, many remain off-site. Being able to offer remote work has expanded NIP's hiring pool, and about a third of the staff is now nationwide, with plans to expand both inside and outside NIP's home base. "The Azure virtual environment is one of the key enablers of the company's growth. We're able to process more things with the same amount of people," Gramblicka notes. "And scaling is much easier as new users join," adds Elshentenawy.

To standardize equipment for its growing workforce, NIP is rolling out Microsoft Surface tablets, using Windows Autopilot to streamline device deployment, as there's no need to image or configure new devices. IT can have them shipped directly to employees. Once powered on, the devices configure themselves based on the employees' profiles, and they're able to get to work in minutes.

As it continues to streamline communications, NIP has eliminated its office phones and switched to a carrier that works with Microsoft Teams. "We have one interface now," Gramblicka says. "Even though we're nationwide, we still work like a local team."

There have been many changes at NIP, but managers and employees are staying closely connected. "We live and breathe on Microsoft Teams," Gramblicka explains. "Employees are using the collaboration tools and whiteboards. They're saving their files in Teams and creating their own channels." Plus, to support remote work, the company plans to roll out

[Microsoft Viva Connections](). One of four available modules, Viva Connections provides employees with a personalized portal of useful information, from current tasks to benefits information and other resources, helping them feel welcome and quickly get up to speed.

Improving compliance and security

Strong compliance controls are critical for remote work, especially in the insurance industry. Customers who use NIP's platform often must comply with their own complex rules, such as HIPAA, SOC, and state regulations such as NYCRR500 and CCPA. Azure has been a benefit here as well. "Microsoft provides all of the services and defenses we need for ourselves and our customers on the same platform," Gramblicka says. "Azure is certified by all the major regulatory bodies. All we have to say to auditors is, 'We're in Azure,' and that answers a lot of questions."

As for cybersecurity, Azure Virtual Desktop helped the company maximize its data control and fulfill its longstanding goal of eliminating its VPN. "Ransomware and malware attacks are rampant out there, and a VPN is an open tunnel for malware to spread," Gramblicka says. "By closing the tunnel, we greatly improved our security posture."

To help manage security for devices and mobile apps, NIP is rolling out [Microsoft Intune](), which enables the strong access controls NIP needs. Intune also makes security updates easier to install, and IT staff can quickly locate and wipe devices remotely if necessary. To keep security procedures in line with best practices, Gramblicka uses Microsoft Secure Score. "Not only does it give you a score, it also tells you line by line how to improve," he says. "I think that's huge."

Fostering a culture of innovation

With help from the Microsoft Account Team, NIP continues to learn about new products and services that improve its operations. For example, after being surprised by a recent cost spike, Gramblicka learned he could set an alert for when changes in usage could result in higher bills. "We have a very open and honest relationship with the Microsoft service team, and that has been really key to our success," he affirms.

NIP is also planning to use Azure Files to replace file servers, Azure Apps Service for web applications, and Azure SQL Managed Instance to replace SQL servers. In addition to optimizing performance, NIP will no longer need to worry about patching and upgrading those services.

The Microsoft account team helps NIP keep an eye toward the future by giving the company advance notice of innovations, a key benefit in a business with slim margins, Gramblicka notes. "We're just one jump ball ahead of competitors and need to bring to bear every advantage we can get. With Microsoft, we're constantly peeking around the corner to see what's next."

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Hagar Elshentenawy: Chief Engineer

NIP Group