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SYNACOR

Secure OCI Environment Brings Big Efficiency to Outsourced Email Service

Technology service provider Synacor, Inc. saw the potential to achieve cost and time savings and to accelerate its service to customers by shifting its hosted-email solution onto Oracle Cloud Infrastructure (OCI). However, the move would not have been possible without effective security. A proof of concept (POC) revealed FortiGate VM as the right firewall to protect the end-user email accounts of Synacor's clients. This cloud-based threat protection is as rigorous as that provided by the physical firewalls in the firm's five data centers. Yet, now the firm can set up a new client 90% faster, network engineers are spending 30% less time deploying hosted-email security services, and the cost to protect client emails is down 50% compared with similar firewall and intrusion prevention in a data-center environment.

Commercial-grade Security Foundational to Cloud Transition

Customers choose technology providers such as New York-based Synacor because of their reputation and hosted delivery of services such as Zimbra Email Collaboration. Some large internet and communications providers offer services to their customers but outsource those services through partner organizations like Synacor. Partner-developed portals can enhance the overall customer value and lower the total cost of ownership (TCO) versus competitors such as Microsoft Exchange.

For more than two decades, Synacor has supported its clients' relationships with their end-users through email and collaboration platforms, managed portals, advertising, and cloud-based identity management solutions. Historically, Synacor provided these services through physical servers in five corporate data centers. About 18 months ago, however, the firm began transitioning to the cloud. It saw the potential to reduce overall costs, increase the predictability of technology spending, and improve its ability to quickly support customers' changing needs—all of which would add up to a competitive advantage.

The firm started the process by launching a POC of its own Zimbra collaboration and email solution on OCI. "We looked at moving some services to different public cloud vendors," says Ian Mitchell, Executive Director, Technical Operations. None of the other options met Synacor's needs as a cloud solution or as a business partner. "Oracle offered a level of service and partnership that its competitors did not."

The POC identified some technical gaps. "Our service-level agreement [SLA] for our hosted-email customers is 99.99% availability," Mitchell explains. "We offer customers

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Details

Customer: Synacor, Inc.

Industry: Technology

Location: Buffalo, New York

Business Impact

- 90% faster setup of a new hosted-email customer
- Improved staff efficiency through streamlined customer deployment
- Better security management via tight integration of cloud security data with third-party on-premises security management tools
- 50% lower cost compared with data-center solutions that provide similar capabilities
- 30% less staff time spent on deployment and renewals for hosted-email service
- Competitive advantage with prospects that want to test-drive email service using their own data

very clear SLAs, so we had to be absolutely sure that OCI was the right environment for our service. Through the POC, we realized there were some areas where we needed to enhance the native OCI service," Mitchell says. Security was one of those areas. Although Oracle is responsible for protecting its OCI infrastructure, customers are responsible for protecting their applications, data, and access across networks. Oracle provides for a base level of cloud infrastructure security but did not offer the visibility and control that Synacor was accustomed to in its on-premises firewalls.

"We needed an enhanced level of enterprise security that included IPS intrusion prevention system [IPS] and intrusion detection system [IDS], and alerted and protected us against distributed denial-of-service [DDoS]," Mitchell explains. "With DDoS attacks, for example, Synacor required notification if there was an attack, so that we could take action accordingly. Before we could even consider moving into OCI, we needed increased visibility and protection—commercial-grade firewalling across our network and in the cloud—for both ourselves and our customers."

Solution to Security Concerns

Oracle recommended Fortinet as a security vendor that could effectively protect applications and data within OCI. Thus, FortiGate virtual appliances were among several security options that Synacor tested during the POC. The firm's network engineers evaluated each option in terms of functionality, performance, ease of use, cost, and the level of support each vendor offered. The FortiGate VM next-generation firewall (NGFW) stood out along each of these dimensions.

Solutions

- FortiGate VM
- FortiGuard AI
- FortiAnalyzer

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"The other reason we selected FortiGate VM is that it was similar to the firewall solutions we were using in our data centers," Mitchell says. "We knew that, in and of itself, it would reduce the amount of training our staff required. It also meant we could easily integrate cloud security logs into the security information and event management [SIEM] solution that we already deployed into our data centers. FortiGate VM provided all the audit logs, and all the monitoring and reporting on ingress and egress traffic, that we needed."

The proof of concept was a success, and deployment of the chosen solutions in a production environment went very smoothly. "OCI and FortiGate VM work well together," Mitchell reports. "It was important for the existing team to easily make the transition from the physical security devices in our data centers to the FortiGate VM solution. When we needed help [with deployment], Fortinet staff were extremely responsive and helpful—but the ease of use of FortiGate VM expedited the overall evaluation and decision to use Fortinet with Oracle Cloud. Even integrating the FortiGate VM data into our SIEM was straightforward."

Efficiency Drives Competitive Advantage

Mitchell says Synacor has reaped generous cost savings. The FortiGate VM solution costs about 50% less than data-center solutions that provide similar firewall and intrusion prevention capabilities. It also requires fewer staff resources. "Our network engineers are spending about 30% less time on coordinating initial procurement, managing renewals, and installing new devices," Mitchell says. "We expect the savings to compound over the next 12 months during migration into OCI."

Now, Zimbra users benefit from the speed with which Synacor's network engineers can roll out a new client's email services. Mitchell explains that many Synacor clients want dedicated infrastructure; they are not interested in having their email platforms hosted in a multitenant environment. In the legacy environment, therefore, most new customers required new physical infrastructure to be procured. "Just acquiring the physical hardware for a new customer would take six to eight weeks, before we even started the configuration," Mitchell says.

In contrast, it now takes Synacor engineers less than one day to build infrastructure and deploy and configure software on OCI, with FortiGate VM security. For clients that need to migrate quickly—perhaps to avoid contract-renewal issues with a different hosted-email provider—the cloud platform gives Synacor an edge. "The accelerated speed of customer setup is a huge benefit of the OCI cloud and FortiGate VM."

Along the same lines, the agility provided by the cloud platform enables Synacor to let prospective clients test-drive Zimbra. "A lot of our customers now want to try before they buy," Mitchell says. "We used to offer customers a demo, but increasingly they want to see the live system in action with their own use case. Of course, the test environment also needs to be secure. Now, partnering with OCI and Fortinet, we can quickly stand up a secure test environment. We do not have to buy hardware and then hope the customer signs up. If the customer does not need it anymore, we can spin the test environment infrastructure down as easily as we set it up."

Compliance is another reason Mitchell finds the secure cloud-based service compelling. "Compliance is becoming paramount to customer requirements, whether it is Service Organization Control [SOC] or General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR], etc.," Mitchell says. "Managing/upgrading the physical data centers to meet different compliance requirements can be expensive and time-consuming. OCI services meet and retain compliance with everything from SOC to GDPR to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA]."

Enterprise Security Makes Cloud Transition Viable

The partnerships with Oracle and Fortinet enable Synacor to offer email-hosting clients enterprise-grade security, even as they transition to a cost-efficient cloud platform. "Email is frequently a target for bad actors," Mitchell says. "The FortiGuard and FortiGate VM solutions give us the same level of protection we provision in our private cloud data centers today, such as the ability to quickly block IP ranges based on potential abuse. That is crucial to our clients. FortiGuard AI analyzes billions of threats per day and is built into Fortinet solutions."

He adds, "Attackers do not just attack your email system by sending you spam. They try to compromise your environment so they can use your email accounts to send spam to other people. A successful attack on an instance of the Zimbra platform would reflect badly on Synacor customers. It would also drive calls to their call centers, penalizing them financially as well as damaging their reputation."

Using a best-in-class NGFW in the cloud gives Mitchell confidence that Synacor's security "has been hardened to the maximum." Using FortiAnalyzer and Synacor's SIEM solution to monitor security incidents strengthens that belief. "The level of security is excellent with Fortinet," Mitchell says. "The partnership is excellent, too. Both the Fortinet and Oracle teams are very hands-on in helping us build a robust, secure environment for our clients."

Mitchell is currently analyzing costs and benefits of moving other Synacor services into OCI. He projects that within the next few months, the firm will begin the first deployment into OCI of its Cloud Identity Management platform. "The Media team has started to evaluate operating services in OCI, as well," Mitchell reports. "We're definitely looking into expanding the relationship with Oracle and Fortinet."

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