



Worldwide News Provider Creates New Content Channels with Hosted Computing

Customer: Associated Press
Web Site: www.ap.org
Customer Size: 100–5,000
Country or Region: United States
Industry: Media and entertainment

Customer Profile

The Associated Press (AP) is the world's oldest news organization, providing news feeds for print, broadcast, and online media. AP has 4,100 employees, and its news appears in 122 countries.

Software and Services

- Windows Azure Platform
 - Windows Azure
 - Service Bus
 - Microsoft SQL Azure
 - Blob Storage

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Jonathan Malek, Chief Architect and Director of Research, Associated Press

The Associated Press (AP) is the world's largest news organization, with bureaus in 97 countries. On average, more than half the world's population sees news from AP on a given day. AP wanted to broaden its reach by encouraging developers to incorporate AP content into their applications. Using the [Microsoft-hosted Windows Azure™ platform](#), AP created a highly scalable solution that simplifies capacity planning and creates new business opportunities.

Business Needs

The Associated Press (AP) provides up-to-the-minute news and information for newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is the world's largest and oldest news organization, with 243 bureaus in 97 countries and a worldwide staff of 4,100. AP serves 1,700 newspapers and 5,000 broadcast outlets in the United States, along with 550 international broadcasters. AP operates as a not-for-profit cooperative owned by its U.S. daily newspaper members, and it maintains a digital photo archive of more than 10 million images.

To open potential revenue streams and find new customers for AP content, the organization began work on a highly scalable application programming interface (API) that developers worldwide can use to incorporate AP news content into their applications. The AP team was eager to learn what developers would do with the new tool, which it calls the Associated Press Breaking News API.

“Part of the mission of this project is to see what people will come up with,” says Alan Wintroub, Director of Development, Enterprise Application Services, Associated Press. “We wanted to tap into the

developer ecosystem and its energy and ideas. We see it as a win-win scenario.”

To deliver its content through the API, AP originally considered an on-premises solution, but the IT staff was concerned about the up-front investment in hardware and software necessary to host the solution and the potential impact to existing services and systems. So, the organization began looking at alternative platforms for the project.

Solution

After considering several “cloud computing” platforms—where applications and data storage are hosted off-premises—AP chose to base its offering on the [Windows Azure™](#) platform from Microsoft. The Windows Azure platform provides an operating system and a set of developer services that can be used individually or together on a pay-as-you-go basis. “With the Windows Azure platform, we can scale up easily without worrying about the capacity planning we would have had to do with other providers,” says Jonathan Malek, Chief Architect and Director of Research, Associated Press. “The infrastructure lets us scale relevant parts of the solution quickly without worrying about the rest of the operating system. It also aligns well with our internal standardization on Microsoft technology.”

AP developers’ existing skills adapted quickly to the Windows Azure platform. “That’s one of the areas where the Windows Azure platform shines,” says Malek. “The quality of tools, the ease of deployment, and the simplicity of management are very compelling.” Development of the Breaking News API began in late 2008, and AP has put several releases into limited production

with a public beta planned for late 2009. Visitors to [developer.ap.org](#) will have access to tools, forums, and support to build applications linking to AP content.

On the back end, a [Microsoft® SQL Azure™](#) database stores news story metadata. Document IDs for retrieval are held in a message queue, which is monitored and processed by Windows Azure, and the documents are stored in Windows Azure [Blob Storage](#).

One key requirement was the ability to easily and securely make large amounts of internal content available externally, so the team turned to the [Service Bus](#) in Windows Azure. The Service Bus helps provide secure connectivity between services and applications to navigate firewalls and network boundaries. “The Service Bus made it easy for us to set something up and expose it outside the firewall. Without the Service Bus, it simply wouldn’t have been an option,” explains Pramod Anchuparayil, Architect, Associated Press.

Benefits

With a flexible, cloud-based platform for its API offering, Associated Press was able to simplify project planning, speed up development, and create new opportunities for business and product innovation.

Simplified Planning

By choosing a hosted development platform, AP has freed itself from the planning and costly hardware investment traditionally required when creating a highly scalable product. “Capacity planning is the thing that stands out as the biggest advantage of the Microsoft cloud model,” says Malek. “The Windows Azure platform

takes that out of the equation for us, unlike the other cloud providers.”

Straightforward Development and Faster Time-to-Market

Developers at AP found that prior experience with Microsoft development tools translated easily to the Windows Azure platform. “We’re pretty much a Microsoft shop, with a focus on C#, [Microsoft SQL Server®](#) [database management software], and [Microsoft Visual Studio®](#) [development system],” says Malek. “Our developers were able to get up to speed rapidly. The tools and environment were impressive right out of the gate.” Thanks to the ease of development, and the ease of planning made possible by the cloud architecture, AP was able to quickly create a prototype and implement its API system. AP believes the Windows Azure platform will continue to help it bring other new products to market as quickly.

New Opportunities for Growth

Although development of the Breaking News API system is still underway, AP is already pleased with its progress. “In a lot of ways, we’ve already been successful,” says Wintroub. “The Breaking News API project has allowed us to explore new possibilities we hadn’t thought of. It has also fostered ideas internally for our own development organization, and it has provided new business opportunities. The platform is a big part of that—I don’t believe we would be in production today without the support of Windows Azure platform.”