Auto Insurer Optimizes WAN to Help Ensure Disaster Recovery

Cisco WAAS enables SafeAuto to place secondary data center at safer distance.

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<tr><td colspan="1">EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td></tr>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Customer Name: SafeAuto
Industry: Automobile insurance
Location: Columbus, Ohio and Somerset, Kentucky
Number of Employees: 1,000
BUSINESS CHALLENGE
• Establish secondary data center for reliable disaster recovery capabilities • Optimize WAN operations between primary and secondary data centers
NETWORK SOLUTION
• Cisco WAN acceleration and optimization appliances at both locations
BUSINESS RESULTS
• Optimized WAN operations, including reliable disaster recovery capabilities

Business Challenge

SafeAuto Insurance Company is a property and casualty insurance carrier dealing exclusively in state minimum insurance coverage to drivers in 16 states. As a self-described "direct-to-consumer" auto insurance company, SafeAuto does not offer policies through independent agents; rather, it sells directly to drivers via telephone and its website. So its call centers and IT resources are more than vital to its success.

Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, the company has long maintained its own data center there, with a back-up center at a colocation facility just eight miles away, until recently. That's when SafeAuto's senior director of IT infrastructure, Matthew Coy, decided that eight miles was too close for comfort. "In the event of a natural disaster or major power outage, it was more than possible that both data centers would be disrupted," says Coy. And if the data centers go down, the business goes down.

A couple of other circumstances made it the ideal time to establish a new backup data center that the company would own and operate itself. SafeAuto's contract with the colocation backup facility was coming to an end, and the growing company was also in the planning stages for a new call center. So, the company's management decided to build a combined call center and data center in one facility. Coy and his colleagues went looking for a place far enough from Columbus to isolate their two data centers sufficiently, but not so far that employees could not drive from one to the other in half a day.

That place was Somerset, Kentucky, some 270 miles south of Columbus. "The community offered us the skilled workforce we were looking for," says Coy. "Plus, a local business park was already served by the telecom infrastructure we needed." Construction began in 2010, and the new facility was ready the next year. That's when Safe Auto observed undesirable levels of network latency between the two facilities.

> *"Cisco made a promise to us and kept it. Now we have an even deeper respect for and relationship with Cisco than before."*
> — **Matthew Coy, Senior Director of IT Infrastructure, SafeAuto**

Network Solution

"It was greater than we had anticipated," says Coy. "You can only estimate latency when you're planning a wide area network. "There are too many variables, starting with the multiple carriers involved in a long distance data network."


Slowing down both data sharing among Microsoft servers and the flow of encrypted Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) traffic, the latency affected claims center and call center applications. Some of the performance problems, such as service disruptions and timeouts, were apparent to users; most were not. More troubling were the effects on various data replication and backup operations, including VMware and SnapMirror performance, and the high availability disaster recovery (HADR) capabilities of DB2, SafeAuto's main database application. The key purpose of SafeAuto's locating its second data center at a distance from the first (to have a dependable disaster recovery capability) was the very thing being compromised by the latency problem.

"If VMware doesn't properly replicate, if your SnapMirror or DB2 HADR performance is faulty, your backup copies of your data won't be usable," says Coy. "After a few tests, we came to the conclusion that if we had to invoke the secondary center in a disaster recovery scenario, it wasn't going to work. We needed a solution before we could trust the Somerset facility."

After looking at their options from several vendors, Coy and SafeAuto's senior manager of network and telecommunications services, Carol Shaltens, turned to Cisco for the quickest and surest solution.

"Cisco has been a long-time partner in building and managing SafeAuto's network," says Coy. "They've earned the epithet 'trusted advisors,' and we had faith they could solve the problems we were having."

"I called our Cisco account manager," says Shaltens. "She recommended that we add a Cisco Wide Area Application Services, or WAAS solution, and that's what we did. It was a straightforward decision."
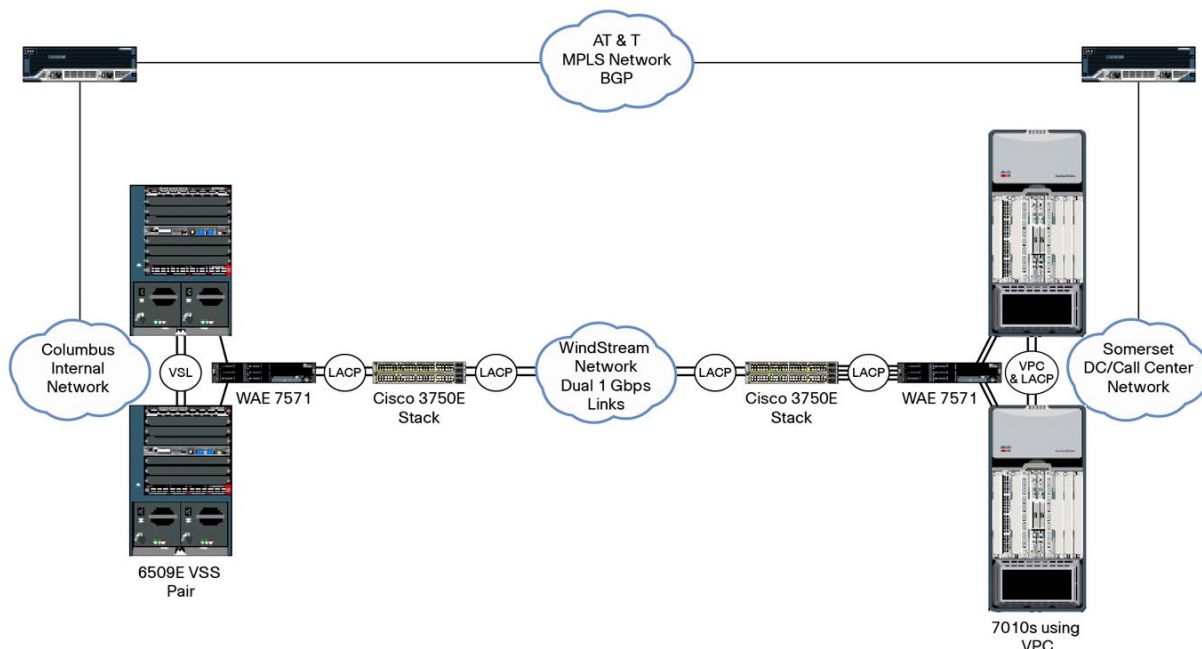
As the network diagram suggests, it was straightforward: SafeAuto added a Cisco® WAVE (Wide Area Virtualization Engine) 7571 WAN optimization appliance on both sides of the company's Windstream network circuit, between each of its dual Cisco switch stacks and the two networks. And that was that. Or was it?

"With networks, things rarely go as you expect," says Mr. Coy. "We discovered some idiosyncrasies in our implementation."

"But Cisco stood by us. Together, we worked on tuning the system until we got the results we wanted."

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<tr><th colspan="2">PRODUCT LIST</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Routing and Switching</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Cisco 3750E switch stacks (2)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Cisco 6509E Catalyst® virtual switch stacks (pair)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Cisco Nexus® 7010 switches with VPC (pair)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Cisco WAVE (wide area virtualization engine) 7571 WAN optimization appliances (2)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Services</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• SMARTnet®</td></tr>
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Business Results

Now SafeAuto has a wholly reliable disaster recovery platform, thanks to Cisco WAAS. Coy's IT team has also leveraged WAAS to compress some data, enabling the WAN to deliver it faster and to reduce the data traffic volume between the company's two facilities. Finally, as the company builds a new policy management system, it can be confident that WAAS will support the resulting increase in call volumes and reporting needs.

"WAAS has exceeded our expectations," says Coy. "It would have been a mistake to go in a different direction, as many voices urged us to do."

The "naysayers," as he says, were dubious about Cisco WAAS. "They said the competition is more mature in WAN acceleration and optimization," says Coy. "Of course, many of those voices, though not all, were competing vendors."

"But we bought this product based on the relationship we have with Cisco, their proven record of delivering results for us," he continues. "We were not disappointed. Cisco made a promise to us and kept it. Now, we have an even deeper respect for and relationship with Cisco than before."

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco Wide Area Applications Services, go to: http://www.cisco.com/go/waas.