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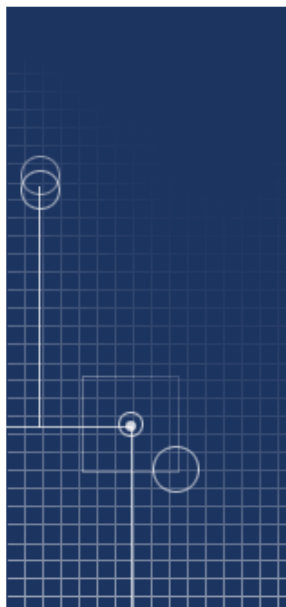
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Page(s) 1,10 in print issue

Evaluating Data Center Colocation Providers

Knowing About Power Systems, Security & Financial Stability Is Essential

At the Midwest-based financial company where J. Wolfgang Goerlich works, the corporate-owned data center was aging and needed repairs and upgrades. The company was also due for its three-year hardware cycle.

“At the same time, our philosophy is to have only a few very highly trained IT professionals and outsource as much of the mundane, physical aspects of IT as possible,” explains the network operations and security manager.

After looking at the costs of upgrading the facilities and other financial-related matters, Goerlich and his team came to the conclusion the best option was to collocate the data.

With collocation, a company locates its IT equipment in a shared environment that contains the necessary infrastructure and security to provide and protect the data, explains Kevin Dean, chief marketing officer at Interxion (www.interxion.com).

“Companies choose to collocate for a variety of reasons, but the three main ones include the connectivity, coverage, and community advantages,” Dean says.

■ Often The Best Solution

Outsourcing IT infrastructure is often the best solution for SMBs because of cost, resources, and time. “SMBs will look to a third-party collocation provider because they serve a specific requirement,” Dean says. “One such requirement that’s growing in demand is a collocation provider’s carrier neutrality. An SMB would not want to pay for the last mile in connectivity from multiple carriers to their own data center, which can cost millions of dollars, all to make sure they have more than one supply

Key Points

- Companies choose to collocate for a variety of reasons, but the three main ones include the connectivity, coverage, and community advantages.
- Data center collocation should focus on neutrality.
- The No. 1 cause of failure in data centers is power, so be sure to make examining the collocation provider’s power systems a top priority in the evaluation process.

servicing their data transit requirements. Instead, they will choose a carrier-neutral colocation facility to take advantage of reduction in cost for IP transit.”

Data center colocation should be all about neutrality, says John Unger, CEO of BCS Data Centers (www.bcsdatacenters.com). A 30-year veteran of the business, Unger explains that in the past, data centers were an afterthought for most companies. “The original colocation centers were ISPs or Web hosting or application providers first, so the data center wasn’t their primary concern. It was just extra space that could earn extra money for the company.” Hence, protecting that outside data wasn’t a high priority. “The data centers need to be nothing more than re-sources available to the occupants.”

Those resources include power, cooling, bandwidth, security, community, and the ability to be able to access whatever is needed within the neutral facility.

“Power, space, bandwidth, and physical security are the primary items to consider,” Unger says. “And customers need to make sure the vendors are experts at managing a data center.”

The age of the technology in use is also a consideration. Computing power over the past 10 years has multiplied immensely. “Any data center built eight or nine years ago won’t be able to support tomorrow’s equipment,” Unger says. “In the colocation world, you shouldn’t have the problem to worry about.” Colocation centers are sold out faster and built with state-of-the-art technology, so the customer gets to stay on the cutting edge without having to worry about improving its business-owned facility.

■ Questions To Ask

When evaluating a potential colocation vendor, Unger says, the first item to inquire about is power systems. “The No. 1 cause of failure in data centers is power,” Unger says. “You want the vendor to walk you through the power system. See what the redundancies are. Have them walk you through the generated power. How much generated power is there vs. load in the facility? Do they have enough generators to run everything in the building? What is the guaranteed battery backup time? And finally, what are the maintenance [procedures] of the power system? The vendor should have a routine process and conduct regular tests on the power system.”

Similar questions can be asked about the cooling system and fire suppression, Unger adds.

Customers also need to inquire about the financial stability of the vendor, although it may be difficult to ask or ascertain. “Most operators are private companies, so they don’t have to show financials. But the truth is, the data centers are expensive to operate,” Unger says.

Security and security procedures are growing increasingly important as threats against data and networks become more sophisticated. Customers should know who has access to the facility and the data.

■ Establish Priorities

When Goerlich began his search for a data center for colocation, his priorities included physical security, surveillance, financial liability of the vendor, and flexibility. “We were also looking for a site with geographic proximity, so we could use their IT hotel space for disaster recovery,” he says.

As he narrowed down his options, Goerlich went to the sites to investigate the facilities and meet the staff. The final decision was made partly based on the vendor with the newer plant and the comfort level with the staff. “It’s hard to quantify, but the responsiveness you get when sending out an RFP or when asking questions about the business can give you a sense of comfort that, if we do go into a long-term relationship with them, they will respond to our needs.”

Specific questions Goerlich asked focused on redundancy in power, cooling, and connectivity. He wanted to know about certifications the data center vendor held and the dedicated space available for his company. He also looked closely at the company’s business numbers, including how long the vendor had been in business, how many

customers it had, and the financial liability.

Goerlich's search for the right colocation facility took about a year. Unger agrees that the process should take a lot of careful consideration. "When moving into a data center, you are making a significant investment," Unger says. "You need to make sure you are going to be happy in this place. You want to be able to live out the lifecycle of the equipment. You don't want to have to do this again after six months. You really need to do your homework." ■

by Sue Marquette Poremba

Successful Colocation

Companies can take several steps to optimize their colocation options. Yehuda Cagen, director of marketing in the business development division of Xvand Technology (www.xvand.com), offers these tips to help:

- Establish business outcomes to ensure measurability and accountability
- Determine the true financial savings
- Choose a proactive business partner
- Select a provider that thrives off your success, not your problems
- Hire a business partner, not just a provider
- Use a shared-risk approach

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