Embrace the change: Creating flexible, scalable infrastructure to comply with Italy's cloud-first strategy

GRUPPO FINMATICA

When you're an IT services company offering cutting-edge solutions to your customers, you might be somewhat conservative when it comes to your infrastructure. After all, it's safer to use tried-and-true technology to ensure optimum service levels, speed, and capacity. But circumstances beyond your control sometimes force you to rethink your network and data center architecture, and you have to boldly go where few have gone before.

That's what happened at Finmatica Group. We (Finmatica S.p.A. with the subsidiaries Data Processing S.p.A and ADS S.p.A.) are present on the market since 1969, and we are one of the first IT consultancies in Italy. We are one of the country's leading providers of ICT software and services for the public administration and healthcare sectors, with over 15,000 people using our solutions daily.

I'm our head of security and ICT infrastructure, which puts me in charge of purchasing and deploying the solutions that power our infrastructure and, ultimately, the products we sell to our customers.

In April 2018, Italy's Department for Digital Transformation (Agenzia per L'Italia Digitale, AgID) issued a directive mandating the migration of public administration infrastructure to the cloud to comply with European Union standards. To stay in business as a public sector IT service provider, we had to move all our products to the cloud.

Accelerating our cloud offerings

Finmatica was no stranger to the cloud. Although most of our customers opted for on-prem solutions, we launched our first cloud-based offerings in 2013, and 20 organizations had already signed up for these services.

At first, we considered launching our software suite as a SaaS offering. We worked with a partner who provided us with a Tier III structured data center, including the appropriate connectivity, servers, and storage to run our virtualized environment. But we soon discovered that having our own IaaS or PaaS solution would have technical and economic advantages.

We were leasing storage and compute and paying for capacity we weren't using. For example, we offer our customers 100 gigabytes of storage, but most use less than a third of that capacity. Also, we were paying for two- and four-terabyte SSDs, but we couldn't use 10–20% of that space because of formatting.

When the government mandated cloud-first public administration infrastructure, the number of clients needing cloud services grew, and we couldn't scale our data center model to handle the new demand.

We needed to take a new approach to our infrastructure to meet government mandates and our growing customer base.

Finding answers with a longstanding partner

We knew this would be a big project, so we turned to a trusted partner: Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE).

Finmatica has a longstanding history with HPE company. We built our first VMware®-based virtual infrastructure on HPE ProLiant servers in 2006 and were impressed with HPE's customized VMware ESX® hypervisor and the level of support from the company. Over the years, our technicians grew familiar with HPE technology, and we continued to see the reliability of their solutions. We decided to rely on them once again to scale our cloud infrastructure, adopting the HPE ProLiant DL380 Gen10 servers and adding HPE Nimble Storage solid-stage storage, which was new to us.

But we wanted to go a step further than just buying new hardware. Due to the strategic importance of our cloud infrastructure, we needed a stronger level of support and scalability. Alongside our data center partner TIM-Noovle, we found our answer in the HPE GreenLake edge-to-cloud platform.

The HPE GreenLake platform is a flexible point-and-click experience, fully managed cloud services that scales up and down, depending on our needs. It frees Finmatica's people to focus on delivering applications instead of worrying about managing data centers and planning capacity. Outsourcing support to HPE also means we can guarantee high service levels to our customers.

HPE offers robust 24/7 support and a world-class Proactive Support Manager Service for HPE Nimble Storage. Our assigned support manager, Raul Hacar, provides timely advice and assistance when we encounter issues or want to discuss best practices and storage strategies.

HPE also offers self-service support through the HPE GreenLake Central and HPE InfoSight predictive analytics. Using these tools, we can monitor and troubleshoot our infrastructure and forecast usage patterns to plan for extra capacity in the coming weeks or months.

We leveraged our infrastructure and new financial incentives

Our new HPE cloud-first infrastructure enabled Finmatica to launch an enhanced disaster recovery (DR) product. In the past, we offered our customers two tiers of DR. The basic level provided all customers one-day recovery point objective (RPO) and two-day recovery time objective (RTO), and our premium tier reduced that to one hour for both. Now, we offer the premium service to everyone.

This change is partly due to the improved performance of the latest generation HPE ProLiant DL380 servers and our HPE Nimble Storage, which has a snapshot feature that allows us to offer an offline backup service to customers who are worried about ransomware attacks. It's also due in part to a new economic incentive.

As part of its COVID recovery strategy, the EU launched a €750 billion Next Generation EU (NGEU) economic stimulus package focused on green and digital technologies. Italy used our allocation to establish the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), including a new three-year Italian cloud strategy to complete the planned transition of the country's public administration IT infrastructure. Thanks to these grants, our customers can take advantage of enhanced services like our premium DR offering and transition their infrastructure to the cloud to comply with the new rules. Our HPE infrastructure helps these businesses take advantage of this new opportunity to become more resilient.
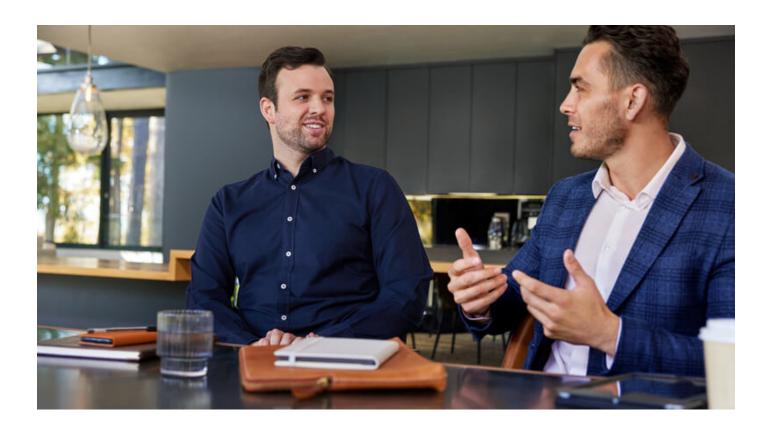
Moving faster and more flexibly

During the first nine months of this project, we needed to expand server and storage hardware due to an increase in demand far beyond the initial forecast. That was never a problem—with the elasticity of the HPE GreenLake platform, we had the opportunity to grow while paying only for the resources we used.

Instead of leasing hardware and managing the infrastructure ourselves, we now rely on a powerhouse partner who has allowed us to reduce costs and increase efficiencies. Thanks to HPE Nimble Storage's deduplication features and VMware's thin provisioning, we are only using 30% of the space available and spending less than 50% of what we used to spend on storage. We see a similar scenario around computational capacity. Since we began using the HPE GreenLake platform we have reduced our spending by 50%, and we still have plenty of available resources to enable VMware's high availability feature. We also have more HPE support and increased flexibility than our traditional data center.

We initially planned to transition from our old data center to our new HPE hybrid cloud infrastructure over two years but migrated everything in just six months. We had to accelerate the process to meet the increased demand created by the Italian cloud strategy, quadrupling our customer base from 20 cloud accounts to 80. Over the next two years, we hope to double or triple this number, and we know our infrastructure will support us without breaking our budget.

We took a chance on the future

All these benefits required a more significant initial investment and forced us to rethink how we buy and maintain infrastructure. It felt a little risky, but with HPE as our partner, everything fell into place, and the results were worth it.

If I could give my peers some advice, I would tell them to embrace change. Italy is not the only country to mandate IT requirements for public administration, healthcare, and other government and private sector services. The United States requires all medical software to comply with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) enshrines data privacy as a right. More recently, American President, Joe Biden, issued the executive order on improving the nation's cybersecurity.

Like Italy's cloud strategy, each of these initiatives required new expenditures and approaches to IT in the short term but created incredible opportunities in the long view. Our new HPE infrastructure has given Finmatica the tools to offer enhanced cloud services to our customers and play a vital role in Italy's public administration IT renaissance.

– **Antonio Campodipietro**
　 Head of security and ICT infrastructure
　 Finmatica S.p.A.

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