

ElasticHosts Prepares Sandstone for Take Off

ElasticHosts helps Sandstone scale for online teambuilding day

About Sandstone: Established in 1992, Sandstone is a teambuilding and away day specialist based in the UK. Sandstone works with companies on site and online to deliver engaging team building exercises with real benefits to the working environment.

Business drivers:

- Launch of world's largest ever online teambuilding event: Space Rescue
- Requirement for support of IT backbone

Why ElasticHosts:

- Proven technology
- Scalable, elastic, pay-as-you-go model

Business Benefits:

- Data replication in UK and US datacentres to ensure total redundancy
- Ability to test applications and services while only paying for usage
- Infrastructure support for multiple activities being operated across the globe simultaneously
- Project successfully delivered with over 100 participants from across the Americas

Future Plans:

- Sandstone has moved its entire infrastructure onto the ElasticHosts platform and will be using the solution to deliver all services moving forward

A new horizon

In 2009 Sandstone launched the first of a portfolio of unique team activities that are delivered online. This would allow, for the first time, global businesses to experience inclusive team days wherever their people were based without needing to leave the office. This approach not only dramatically reduces fiscal and time commitments but is also very appropriate to teams that operate on a global scale. It uses technology to allow team members to interact in the same way that their day-to-day work does.

The big challenge for Sandstone, however, was gaining a solid IT infrastructure to support these operations. Sandstone's online events required complete redundancy and a high amount of processing power to cope with spikes of traffic at peak times. Previously, Sandstone used a virtual dedicated server (VDS) to run its website and online events, but found it was still paying for unused capacity between events. Sandstone therefore started to look for alternatives that could offer greater scalability and had the potential for running more of its online events simultaneously on the same platform.

Alan Hunt, Managing Director for Sandstone, explains: "We are a relatively

small business, but our online events allow us to punch above our weight; but these events can also put a lot of demands on our IT infrastructure. We need seamless performance from our hosting provider in order for all the different elements to work successfully and for the participants to get the best experience possible. During our online team building events, server utilisation can shoot up significantly from what we normally use, so we considered moving to the cloud to meet these needs without being limited by capacity or faced with spiralling costs."

Launch date scheduled

Sandstone was planning an ambitious bespoke team building event using their innovative "Space Rescue" option for a client that wanted to bring together multiple participants from a range of locations. It would be the largest single team building event ever delivered online. The exercise put participants into groups that have to work together to help a "spacecraft" encountering technical problems land safely back on earth. The simulation presents a number of tasks including testing dexterity, creativity and numeracy to guide the ship back home. Communication between the "space centre" and the "crew" was conveyed using simulated instant messaging and so the event relied on a solid IT backbone to work.

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“In order to make the event a success, we needed to be able to co-ordinate communications between participants who are based in very different locations across the Americas,” Hunt continues. “Our largest online group size prior to this event was 120 people. This was literally 10 times larger. We were unsure how much server capacity we would need, so we needed the right hosting provider to allow us to ensure we delivered on the day.

Being able to scale up if needed was a big requirement, but we also wanted to avoid being locked into a rigid contract set at an upper limit of capacity that we wouldn’t use before or afterwards. We did some research on the different cloud providers in the market and ElasticHosts’ previous success stories and testimonials really stood out. Their scalable, elastic, pay-as-you-go model made good business sense to us.”

Countdown commencing

The largest job Sandstone faced before the event was the migration of all its data from the old VDS over to ElasticHosts’ servers in its San Antonio data centre. Although Sandstone’s Space Rescue event is not sensitive to latency, it chose the ideally situated Texas-based data centre as it wanted to maximise the response time to participants who were all joining the event from across the Americas. Furthermore, Sandstone needed to ensure it had complete redundancy for the entire evening so, as a back-up scenario, it had an exact copy of its infrastructure running in ElasticHosts’ London data centre ready to step in if the servers in the US data centre fell over. Sandstone found that both the initial migration of data from the VDS and between the US and UK data centres all went smoothly and without interruption.

Mission accomplished

The Space Rescue event involved some 1,200 participants working together from around the Americas. The event was a world first with regard to scale for an online team building event and took place without any downtime or technical problems. Space

Rescue was also a first for Sandstone’s client and allowed it to bring together office workers and remote workers previously unable to participate in any office-based team days and helped establish better working relationships.

Hunt continues: “We found ElasticHosts’ cloud platform incredibly easy to use and were able to easily scale up CPU, memory and storage of virtual machines using the self-service web interface. This meant we could set up a small server on ElasticHosts’ platform that made it far easier to test in the lead up to the event. This also made data migration an easy process, since we could scale up capacity while moving data over and scale down back down after when no longer needed. ElasticHosts’ pay-as-you-go charging model also meant we were only charged for the cloud servers and capacity that we used rather than a flat cost across all server usage, giving us an improved quality of service.”

The next frontier

Sandstone was able to deliver an engaging and seamless experience for participants, as well as deliver a better service to its client, giving it confidence to create more of these bespoke online events in future. Sandstone is currently migrating its flagship online team building event “VirtuWall” across to the ElasticHosts platform too. Hunt concludes:

“ElasticHosts’ service made the whole event run flawlessly and helped it to become an incredible success. Although we were happy with our previous service, we were unaware of the benefits that we could experience through cloud hosting and couldn’t have asked for a better provider. The level of support was exemplary. The reason we chose ElasticHosts was the technology, the reason we are staying with the company is the quality of technology and response of service.”

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