Terri Rolf & Mike Arnold
Havre Public Schools

C A S E   S T U D Y

Disaster Led Havre Public Schools To Launch Black Mountain Software In The Cloud. They Quickly Discovered They Had Launched A Better Way Of Operating.

THE CLIENT

Havre Public Schools is a K-12 school district located 50 miles south of the Canadian border in the rolling plains of north central Montana. In the early 1900's, the Great Northern Railway brought farming, ranching and development to Havre, just a few miles north of historic Fort Assiniboine. Today, Havre is a major BNSF railroad hub, the county seat of Hill County, home to Montana State University Northern, and an important agricultural, business and medical community along Montana's Hi-Line.

The population of Havre is just under 10,000. Total student population in Havre's high school, middle school, and three elementary schools is just under 2,000. The Havre Public School District, with its 350 employees - including 135 teachers and 12 school administrators - has built a solid reputation as a system where children's needs come first. These five successful schools are supported by six district staff, including Superintendent Andy Carlson, Assistant Superintendent Leland Stocker, Business Manager Mike Arnold, Payroll Clerk Cathy Kihara, and Accounts Payable Clerk Terri Rolf. Information Technology support services are provided by staff member Aaron Hanson.

BACKGROUND

When a school district's day-to-day focus is on innovation and excellence in educating tomorrow's leaders, reliable, time-saving accounting software becomes an operational essential.

In 2012, after using another vendor's school accounting software for 22 years, Havre Public Schools began a search for software and service that would better meet their needs and Montana Office of Public Instruction requirements. In 2013, they switched to Black Mountain Software. The applications were purchased and installed on their local hardware.

THE SITUATION

Early in 2014, with school accounting, payroll, student accounts, human resources, purchase orders, and many other Black Mountain Software products continuing to work well for them, Havre Public Schools inquired about BMS Cloud Hosting services.

The district was experiencing local internal network problems that were troublesome and time-consuming. "Network issues were a constant and growing worry," explains Business Manager Mike Arnold. "We started to look seriously at cloud hosting services because we knew it would be a big relief to get concerns about backups, network security, updates, and network errors off of our plates."

And then the virus hit. It was one of those ransomeware viruses that sneak into an organization's server system through an employee's innocent click of a junk email, quickly rendering the organization's files encrypted and inaccessible. Initially taking some comfort in knowing that they had a nightly backup process in place, Havre Schools at first believed they would be able to avoid paying ransom to the malware company to have their files restored. But as luck would have it, they discovered that the server that held all of their financial data had not been backed up nightly.

Suddenly faced with a nearly complete loss of business operations functionality and data, and having experienced first-hand the speed and insidiousness of a malware virus, Havre Public Schools called Black Mountain Software for help.

THE APPROACH

After an evaluation of the situation, Black Mountain Software recommended that Havre Public Schools immediately move to BMS Cloud Hosting as the quickest and most reliable way to regain business operations. The school district also ended up having to pay ransom to the malware invader in order to regain access to their financial data which had not been backed up.

"I didn't have to think twice about switching to the cloud," stated Mike Arnold, whose diverse support and supervisory job includes managing the school district's budget. "I had already visited with other schools and they were all pleased with the BMS Cloud. I also had previously spoken with the software engineers at Black Mountain and had learned that Amazon is their cloud platform provider. Amazon's strong reputation along with Black Mountain's strong reputation made it an easy decision – especially with the compromised situation we were in."

Engineers at Black Mountain collected Havre Public Schools' raw financial data, quarantined it and ran checks to make sure no files were infected. Then they cleaned the data, compressed it, and transferred it to the BMS Cloud. By identifying and collecting only the essential raw data, they were able to get Havre Schools up and running fast.

THE RESULTS

Havre Public Schools was running smoothly on the BMS Cloud within two days of the disastrous virus attack which had crashed their local server and locked up their software functionality and financial information. In the end, they did not lose any data and didn't have to rebuild anything, and they are now in a more secure situation than they were before the virus attack due to being on the cloud where they are less vulnerable to malware and assured of automatic backups.

"Customer service is where BMS shines," stated Mr. Arnold. "Black Mountain took our crisis by the horns and showed us that they care and are here to help." Accounts Payable Clerk Terri Rolf concurred, stating, "It was great how BMS staff stayed in touch with us so closely during those two days and got our data caught back up to where it was when it crashed. It was phenomenal."

With their information restored and access to their software made more stable and reliable thanks to BMS Cloud Hosting, Havre School District has had smooth sailing in the months following their data disaster.

THE BENEFITS

Even though their decision was made under stressful circumstances, Havre Public Schools feels extremely confident in the decision to switch to accessing their Black Mountain Software products and data via cloud hosting.

Some of the benefits cited are:

• Error reports from network problems are nearly non-existent. Black Mountain Software engineers assessed Havre's situation as follows: "Havre Schools experienced 274 error reports in the 300 days prior to BMS Cloud Hosting – meaning they averaged nearly one per day. Since Havre started running on the BMS Cloud, they average fewer than one error report per month."

• Clerks and office managers now spend time using the software and getting more out of it, rather than tracking down errors and trying to solve problems.

• The IT staff no longer has to maintain a server, which has greatly freed up their time and allowed them to tackle more important goals and tasks for the school district.

• Remote access is now fast and easy. "The greatest thing about being on the cloud is when I am on the road or working from home, I can easily get to my data by clicking on the icon on my laptop computer," said an enthusiastic Mike Arnold. "No more remote access into my desktop and dealing with the lag time that goes with that."

THE BOTTOM LINE

In the months before his organization became a victim of malware, Havre Schools Business Manager Mike Arnold had educated himself on cloud computing and understood that the cloud is a smart decision for most small organizations that require high security, lower hardware costs, and reduced network problems. He had also done his homework and felt confident in Black Mountain Software's cloud solution and BMS' use of Amazon as a cloud platform provider. Although an unfortunate situation propelled the school district into switching to cloud hosting of their Black Mountain software products, the process was quick and easy, and the outcome has only been positive. Quite simply, the "big relief" from local network problems and data security risks that administrator Mike Arnold was in search of came in the form of a cloud.