

“It is now easier for us to deliver the high standards of performance that we want to provide – and that our clients expect.”

Nick Wiechers
Operations Director
Solutions Division, StepStone



European Recruiters and Job Seekers Benefit from Fast and Reliable Online Services with BIG-IP LTM



Industry:

e-recruitment

Challenges:

- Ensure high application availability, 24x7x365
- Improve the distribution of traffic across multiple servers
- Speed up transactions and email communications

Solution:

- BIG-IP® Local Traffic Manager 6400
- BIG-IP® Local Traffic Manager 1500

Benefits:

- Reduced risk of having all sites and services down simultaneously
- Improved performance for customers
- Rapid dispatch of one million email alerts
- Easier and less complex network management
- Greater scalability to respond to business growth

Overview

StepStone is Europe's leading e-recruitment business. Founded in Norway in 1996, it now provides services for organisations and job hunters across 13 European countries. Its Online Division provides a web-based public job board, which is used by organisations of all sizes to attract new employees. The company's Solutions Division operates as an application service provider (ASP), offering a hosted recruitment application for clients. The application enables companies to manage their entire recruitment process online, from posting the job vacancy on the Internet, to selecting candidates and hiring new employees. For both divisions of the business, the high availability and high performance of applications are crucial.

Challenges

In a recent report, analyst firm The Gartner Group named StepStone as the only European-headquartered vendor in the leaders' quadrant for e-recruitment software. StepStone was keen to maintain this leadership position and knew that its success would only continue if it consistently offered excellent network performance.

In the Online Division, StepStone was attracting growing numbers of recruiters and job hunters. At any one time, it displayed over 45,000 listings for more than 50,000 jobs

and welcomed around 20 million visitors to its sites each quarter. The company had to be able to not only manage a massive number of transactions every day, but also provide a fast and responsive service 24x7x365.

In its IT infrastructure, the Online Division had fifteen web servers, four database servers and five mail servers, in a three-tiered architecture. To help it meet growing customer demands, it needed a better way to ensure the effective distribution of traffic across these servers. StepStone typically dispatches around one million email alerts every day to subscribers, highlighting new jobs that match their profiles. Unfortunately, it was experiencing bottlenecks in this process and wanted to be able to optimise its network infrastructure performance, so that it could dispatch these emails much more quickly.

In the Solutions Division, the company faced a similar challenge. The servers used in this part of the business are all Microsoft-based, and the company used Microsoft's in-built load balancing capability to manage the distribution of traffic across its servers. This facility was adequate for managing solution access for job hunters, but the company wanted to be able to manage solution access for recruiters more effectively.



It was important for StepStone to preserve session state, to ensure that all users had uninterrupted and consistent application access. The way that the Microsoft solution did this was by looking at IP addresses. However, because many job hunters and recruiters accessed StepStone's applications via a proxy server, they all had the same IP address. As a result, traffic was not distributed in an efficient manner.

Solution

StepStone's Online Division was the first to make the decision to upgrade its existing network solutions. Over a period of several weeks, it researched and evaluated products from a number of different vendors. "F5 stood out clearly," says Gauthier Andries, Director of System Engineering.

The Online Division selected the F5 BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager (LTM) 6400 solution and purchased two devices, one for active use and one as a back-up. "The F5 solutions were quick and easy to deploy," explains Andries. "From the kick-off meeting to the go-live, the project took just three months."

Previously, the Online Division had used six separate devices in its network – two for load balancing, two for SSL encryption and two for caching. BIG-IP LTM replaced all of these multi-vendor products and performed all three functions in one box. "By implementing one integrated solution from F5 we reduced network complexity considerably," says Andries. "We also reduced the cost of maintenance."

A few months later, StepStone purchased F5's BIG-IP Local Traffic Manager 1500 solution to address its load balancing challenges in the Solutions Division. "I was already aware of F5 products and had heard about their successful use in our Online Division," says Nick Wiechers, Operations Director of the Solutions Division. "BIG-IP LTM met all of our needs precisely because it could handle session state even for https traffic, without relying on source IP address."

Benefits

The use of F5 solutions has helped StepStone to improve its application performance, reduce costs and improve service to customers in a range of different ways.

Previously, when the Online Division experienced a technical issue on one server, the problem would frequently bring all of the company's thirteen country-specific web sites down at the same time. With the use of BIG-IP LTM, however, the division is now able to isolate problems on specific sites. As a result, if the Belgian site experiences technical difficulties, for example, all other country sites remain fully operational.

"When all thirteen sites used to go down at once, it used to put huge pressure on the IT team," says Andries. "By localising the problem, the IT team can now focus on it and resolve it more quickly. In addition, we minimise the business risk and loss of income that occurs when multiple sites are out of action for long periods of time."

In the Online Division, BIG-IP LTM also helps the company to send out email alerts to job hunters much more quickly, so that emails are in all recipients' inboxes first thing in the morning. The company has succeeded in reducing the dispatch time from over twelve hours to less than seven. Andries observes: "The F5 solution helps us deliver a faster and more secure service for customers."

StepStone is impressed by the management capabilities and user interface of the BIG-IP device. "Our previous solutions needed people with expert knowledge to use them," says Andries. "As a result, only two people in our organisation could manage them. The user interface of BIG-IP LTM is much easier to use, and we now have five or more people who use them regularly. The solution also gives us a better overview of what is happening in our network."

Scalability is a very important issue for StepStone. The company has grown by 100% each year recently and it fully expects to continue with this dramatic growth. "F5 was the most scalable solution that we evaluated," says Andries. "It is just amazing that two small boxes can handle millions of requests."

Through the use of BIG-IP LTM in the Solutions Division, StepStone is able to ensure that its ASP traffic is correctly distributed at all times. Wiechers concludes: "It is now easier for us to deliver the high standards of performance that we want to provide – and that our clients expect."

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