Zachry Corporation boosts IT agility

By offloading business-critical SAP and VMware workloads to Rackspace, Zachry Corporation increased the efficiency and strategic value of its IT team.

Our customer

Zachry Corporation is a construction and engineering industry leader, helping its customers plan, build and renew critical facilities to the highest safety standards.

The obstacles they faced

The Zachry Corporation IT team had the skills to manage its own data center, but the operational burden kept it from evolving into a strategic business partner.

How we helped

Business/IT Transformation, Infrastructure, Managed Hosting — Dedicated Servers, Private Cloud, VMware®, VMware Server Virtualization, Colocation

What we achieved together

Instead of "keeping the lights on" at its own data center, the Zachry Corporation IT team can focus on forward-looking projects that directly benefit the business.
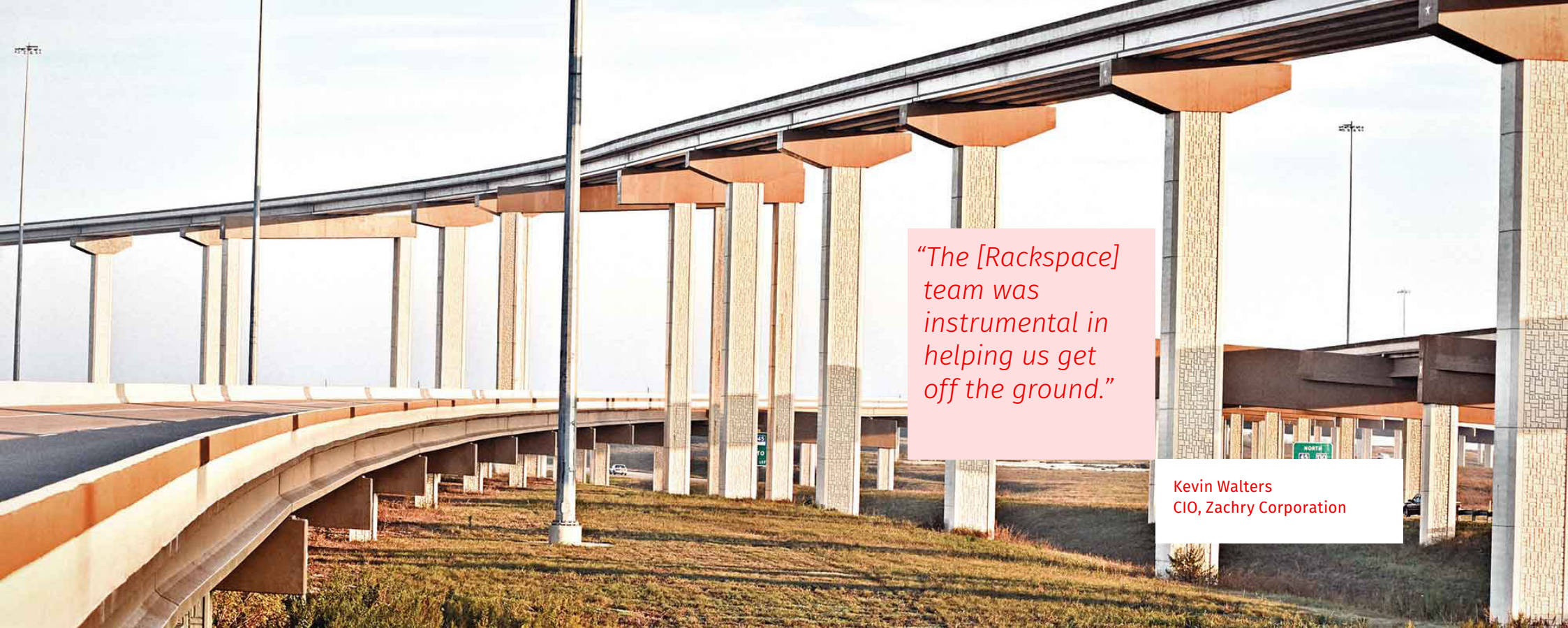
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Kevin Walters
CIO, Zachry Corporation

Over 90 years of building and engineering excellence

In 1924, H. B. "Pat" Zachry left his job at the Texas Department of Transportation to start his own business. His first contract: the construction of a series of four concrete-reinforced bridges, aided in part by mule-drawn wagons. Over 90 years later, Zachry Corporation plans and works on a diverse range of transportation, building and heavy civil construction projects all around the world.

Zachry's portfolio includes the High Five Interchange in Dallas, which involved a particularly innovative approach to bridge and overpass construction. Zachry leveraged a 101-ton segment erector from Italy — the first-of-its-kind to be used in the United States — to enable segmental construction. The segment pieces were pre-cast in an on-site casting yard, allowing for simple and efficient assembly.

"It looked like LEGO® pieces," explained Kevin Walters, CIO at Zachry. "And it helped us minimize traffic disruptions and deliver the project one year ahead of schedule, which was really good for the community."

At the time, the High Five was the biggest public project the Texas Department of Transportation had ever awarded to a construction company. The American Public Works Association named the High Five project a Public Works Project of the Year, and the Associated General Contractors of Texas National Partnership for Highway Quality Control recognized Zachry with an Outstanding Partnering Achievements award.

Other high-profile projects include the U.S. embassy building in Beijing and, more recently, 38 miles of Grand Parkway in Houston.

Starting from scratch

After a company reorganization in 2007, the Zachry IT team had the opportunity to rebuild its IT infrastructure from scratch. The company didn't have its own data center, and it needed unbiased, expert guidance, so it reached out to Rackspace. "Once we started talking to Rackspace, it just started making sense," said Walters. "The team was instrumental in helping us get off the ground, with key parts of our infrastructure hosted at Rackspace." And when Walters and his team were preparing for a major launch, with only a four-month timeline, Rackspace helped them meet the challenge on time. "I can't imagine having to have built all of that — going and purchasing and building it out," Walters added. "I just don't know that we would have been able to pull it together. It was a critical key to our success there." [Our relationship with Rackspace] was really our first major IT partnership. Rackspace always came through for us, and we started

expecting all of our partners to work like that," Walters explained. "They set the bar high."

A walk through the wilderness

In an effort to reduce costs, Walters and the IT team started considering whether they could manage their own data center, instead of outsourcing it to Rackspace.

"We'd brought a lot of good people on board, and we wanted to learn what our full capabilities were as a team," Walters said. "We thought, 'Well, yeah, we can do this ourselves, and we'll save money. This isn't a big deal.' But it always looks easier on paper. Rackspace had made it look easy."

"I think we did a good job at it," he continued, "but it was tough, and there were several times when I would say, man this was simpler when I didn't have to worry about the power going out in our own data center."

Walters refers to this time as Zachry's "walk through the wilderness" phase. But he agrees that it was a valuable experience, because it showed the internal team, from an IT standpoint, where it could provide more value to the company.

Instead of focusing on "keeping the lights on" at the data center, the Zachry IT team wanted to put its talents toward improving the business.

"We learned we need to be IT service providers to our business," Walters explained, "which means being good at connecting job sites, being good at helping manage data for bids and estimates, and being able to integrate things and provide value that

"My wife and I are standing in the storm, with her holding the umbrella while I use a dipstick to figure out how much fuel is left in the generator. It was crazy."

Kevin Walters
CIO, Zachry Corporation

is hard to find if you're not part of the business."

"We don't need to be good at hardware, firmware updates and drivers, and all those things that kept us up late at night," he concluded. "Let's be good at what we need to be good at and let the guys that are really good at all this other stuff that we're worrying about all the time — hardware, the data center and all that goes with it — let them do it."

A fresh start

After returning to Rackspace, the Zachry team sat down with Rackspace engineers to discuss a new strategy. The engineers were both deeply knowledgeable and objective — committed to finding the best solution for Zachry's unique needs. They worked through several whiteboarding sessions — examining the Zachry infrastructure and existing licensing commitments, considering various architectures and analyzing the pros and cons of each.

"We worked together to figure out what would work best," Walters said. "Should we have a combination of Rackspace and AWS? Managed co-location with Rackspace? Or go all the way through the hypervisor? The Rackspace team helped us explore all avenues. And we knew that, whatever model we chose, we would get the same great support from Rackspace."

In the end, Zachry chose Rackspace Managed Colocation, which allows it to take full advantage of its existing licenses. The company leans on Rackspace for expertise and support, while internal teams focus on running its VM workloads.

Walters explained, "During our 'walk through the wilderness,' we developed a lot of

VMware skills. Managed Colocation allows us to leverage those skillsets, as well as

having to worry about the hardware, the drivers and schedule initiators, and all those things that were such a burden."

"Could we do it ourselves? Sure," he said, "But it would be painful and cost more. To us, Managed Colocation was the best fit."

Getting out of the data center — for good

After moving its dev/test and disaster recovery to Rackspace, Zachry was ready to migrate its SAP ERP environment — which includes over 50 servers and multiple components, from CRM to the traditional financial SAP engine, as well as the equipment module mobile pieces.

"There's so much to an SAP solution. It's such a vast environment, and it requires so many different skills that you can't possibly staff for that at our level, for the size of company we are," Walters explained.

Rackspace Managed SAP offers agile delivery of the deep SAP skills and expertise Zachry requires — and support whenever it's needed — without adding to the company head count.

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"With Rackspace, we're paying only for what we're using," Walters said. "It helps us because the budget is really based on unit cost at that point, which for a construction company is great because, now, we know exactly what it's going to cost us per gigabyte, per user. Getting down to those unit costs is important because that's how we work."

Next, Zachry plans to have Rackspace help it migrate some workloads to the public cloud, and it's considering Office 365 for Exchange and SharePoint.

The Fanatical Experience

Zachry has experienced what it's like to be on the receiving end of Fanatical Experience®. And Fanatical Experience has become a model for how Zachry works with its own customers.

"To me, it means that when I call, I'm going to talk with someone who is knowledgeable, who cares about the problem, who's there to do whatever they can to solve it," Walters explained. "Even when it's not necessarily a Rackspace issue, but an issue with another vendor, they stick with us until it's solved."

"It's unlike anything we've experienced anywhere else. It's meant a lot to us," he concluded. "And it's why we're a Rackspace customer today."