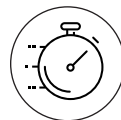VMware Tanzu has helped increase COUNTRY Financial's developer efficiency through automation

COUNTRY Financial worked with a partner to help move to an agile development work process

Pieces of new functionality are now developed and released to customers in weeks, instead of once every 12 to 18 months

Customers have responded well to the new COUNTRY Financial functionality, and adoption of the platform has increased

COUNTRY Financial

Hitting the refresh button on Dev and Ops

How COUNTRY Financial stays in sync with fast-paced customer expectations

For COUNTRY Financial CIO Brad Hildestad, digital transformation isn't about adopting new technologies and development processes, though this is required. Rather, for Hildestad, and for COUNTRY Financial as a whole, digital transformation is first and foremost about delivering the best possible experience to the company's home, life, and auto insurance customers whenever and wherever they are.

"Our customers' expectations change each and every day," said Hildestad. "And to me, it's really changed with the consumerization of IT. They want to do business with us the way they want to, when they want. So we've had to adapt how we interact with them and how we support and deliver those services."

Tracy Feger, director of marketing interactive assets and development at COUNTRY Financial, agrees. "Customers expect to be able to have service, access to their documents 24x7, whenever they want and however they choose—whether it's face to face or over a device," Feger said. "And their expectations are evolving rapidly, which means we as an organization need to evolve rapidly with them."

Having recognized the need to adapt to changing customer expectations, COUNTRY Financial is in the midst of transforming how it develops digital products and services to do just that. At its heart, the effort is centered on adopting a modern, cloud native platform and agile software development practices to increase software release velocity to iteratively respond to customer feedback. The results are already being felt, with customers enjoying new ways of doing business with the company and COUNTRY Financial's operations pros and developers feeling "reinvigorated" about their jobs.

INDUSTRY
Financial Services

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Bloomington, Illinois

SOLUTION
VMware Tanzu™ Application Service™

"[VMware Tanzu Application Service] has freed up time for our developers to do other types of work, namely creating compelling software for our customers, that they would rather do than paperwork or compliance activities."

DEANA LAURIA,
VICE PRESIDENT OF APPLICATION
DEVELOPMENT, COUNTRY FINANCIAL

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Laying the platform foundation

COUNTRY Financial knew it needed to modernize its legacy IT environment if it wanted to release software faster. The good news was that the company had long prioritized the voice of the customer when it came to deciding what to build. But as it was, most developers at the company practiced traditional waterfall development methodology, and a typical software project took a year or more to move from idea to production rollout.

Big-bang, once-a-year software releases are, by their very nature, risky. With customer expectations changing constantly, features that seemed like a great idea a year ago suddenly feel stale and outdated 12 months later when they finally land in customer hands. And with little to no customer feedback informing the development process once initial requirements are laid out, there are few if any opportunities to course correct.

At COUNTRY Financial, developers practiced waterfall methodology and infrequent software releases in part because of the limitations of their underlying legacy infrastructure. Many operational tasks, such as provisioning new test and dev environments, were manual affairs, as was the actual process to release software to production. This burdened not just COUNTRY Financial's IT department, but also developers who were responsible for manual tasks, such as configuring networks and connecting to supporting services.

To remove these burdens, COUNTRY Financial turned to Tanzu Application Service. The cloud native platform is purpose-built to automate as many operational tasks as possible, as well as abstract away the underlying complexity of the infrastructure from developers. It allows operations pros to spend more time delivering value-add services to development teams, and enables development teams to spend more time writing and shipping code to production at a much quicker pace than previously possible.

Theo Merian, a platform engineer at COUNTRY Financial, said the benefits of a cloud native platform became apparent immediately after deploying Tanzu Application Service.

"[Tanzu Application Service] automates so many things that just makes my life so much easier, such as provisioning virtual machines and implementing operating system patches," Merian said. "So instead of spending time on those things, I spend more time working with our developers and evolving the platform to better serve their needs, which ultimately is much more valuable for the business and our customers than spending all day rolling out patches."

Tanzu Application Service has proved beneficial to developers, too. Not only do they now have a true partner in the COUNTRY Financial operations team, they can focus more of their time on what they do best—writing, shipping and iterating on great code. Again, the automation capabilities of Tanzu Application Service play a big role, according to Deana Lauria, vice president of application development.

"We've gotten positive feedback from our developers on things that they used to have to do manually, that now we've automated that still make us compliant and auditable," Lauria said. "[Tanzu Application Service] has freed up time for our developers to do other types of work, namely creating compelling software for our customers, that they would rather do than paperwork or compliance activities."

Small pieces of functionality equal big value

The platform, however, was just one piece of the puzzle. To get the full value of Tanzu Application Service, and to achieve its objective of delivering great digital services to customers whenever and wherever they want them, COUNTRY Financial developers needed to shed waterfall methodology and learn how to create software using agile and lean methods. It's a big shift, requiring not just adopting new techniques, but embracing a collaborative, empathetic mindset. To help with the transition, COUNTRY Financial decided to work with a trusted partner, *Kin + Carta (formerly Solstice)*.

Kin + Carta practices and helps its clients learn agile development methods, with an emphasis on customer experience-driven development. In the case of COUNTRY Financial, Kin + Carta worked side by side with its developers on site at the company's headquarters in Bloomington, Illinois. For 12 weeks, Kin + Carta developers and COUNTRY Financial developers practiced pair programming, in which two developers work together on one computer writing code. The approach has proven to result in high-quality code, and is also an effective way for one developer to learn from another. And that's just what happened.

> "[VMware] and [Kin + Carta] have helped us move to agile development processes, so we've seen a lot of efficiency improvements in everything that we are doing and delivering for our customers."

TRACY FEGER
DIRECTOR OF MARKETING INTERACTIVE ASSETS AND DEVELOPMENT, COUNTRY FINANCIAL

"Working with [Kin + Carta], our development culture is changing. It's becoming more collaborative. It's becoming faster. And it's becoming more about delivering smaller pieces of capabilities and functionality more quickly for our business partners," said Lauria.

Lauria's last point is particularly important. One of the key outcomes of adopting Tanzu Application Service and learning agile methods from Kin + Carta is that now COUNTRY Financial

developers prioritize building software in short, frequent iterations rather than yearlong marathon cycles. Small pieces of new functionality are developed and released to customers in weeks instead of tens or hundreds of new features delivered all at once every 12 to 18 months. The teams observe how the functionality is used, then determine what to build next based on their observations and customer feedback, and the process continues.

The benefits for the customer are twofold. One, customers get new functionality that delivers real, if incremental, value much more frequently. And two, because new functionality is developed iteratively over time, there's no dramatic learning curve as there is with a complex, big-bang release.

"So for us, when we roll out something to our customers, we want it to be a non-event," said Feger. "[VMware] and [Kin + Carta] have helped us move to agile development processes, so we've seen a lot of efficiency improvements in everything that we are doing and delivering for our customers."

Happy customers, happy product teams

One of the first pieces of software COUNTRY Financial developed on Tanzu Application Service using the methods learned with Kin + Carta was a new mobile application. Rather than spend months or even years gathering requirements and attempting to build the perfect app with dozens of whiz-bang features, the product team instead focused on building a minimal viable product. The goal was to build an application with just enough functionality to prove useful for customers, then learn what to build next based on how customers interacted with the application in the real world.

"We wanted something that if our customers downloaded the app and used it once, they would keep it on their phone and continue using it," Feger said. "That way, we know we're delivering immediate value to the customer, and at the same time collecting the feedback we need to make smart decisions about where to take the application next. With this approach, the application continues to evolve and become more and more useful over time."

One of the first features the team built was the ability for customers to store and view their insurance card on their mobile phones. It's a simple capability that took just weeks to develop and release thanks to the combination of the new agile methods the team practiced with the support and automation of Tanzu Application Service. And, it turned out to be a valuable capability for customers.

"Think about driving," Feger noted. "If I get pulled over, I am not one of those people that has their insurance card readily available. Is it in my glove box? Is it in my wallet? Who knows. But with our mobile app, customers have their insurance card with them at all times. So that's a tangible benefit, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive."

Since the initial rollout of the mobile app, the team continues to iterate and roll out new features in small increments. This includes roadside assistance, so stranded motorists can quickly call for help. Customers also now have the ability to pay their bills and even get online quotes through the app.

"Customers have responded well to the functionality we're providing," said Hildestad. "Our adoption's up, more and more people are using it, so that tells me that they're starting to pay attention and notice the fact that we're putting these new interaction methods out there."

It's not only customers that are happy. COUNTRY Financial's operations team and developers are happier and more engaged, too.

"Traditional platform operations engineers go narrow and deep into a technology. In today's world, with a platform like [Tanzu Application Service], they don't need to do that but can instead focus more on providing a great experience for their customers, who are the developers," said Kim Fellner, director, infrastructure engineering at COUNTRY Financial. "So now they are sitting at the table with the developers and working to bring new products to life. That is what gets them excited."

Lauria witnessed a similar reaction from her developers.

"We went into this wanting to be more iterative, wanting to be faster to market. But when we had our first department-wide meeting with all our developers after starting to work with [VMware] and [Kin + Carta], the thing that I really walked away with was the passion and the excitement and the collaboration across the team members," said Lauria. "I saw something there I hadn't seen here before. It really was amazing, and I want to see more of that."

It's fun to come to work

While the team at COUNTRY Financial is excited about what it's accomplished to date, the journey is far from over. In fact, the journey never really ends. Rather, the company—operations pros, developers, and line-of-business people alike—continue to evolve and improve their skills over time, all with the goal of providing the best digital experience to customers they can.

Hildestad said the team plans to roll out Tanzu Application Service to more lines of business throughout the enterprise and with it modern agile development methodologies it learned with the help of Kin + Carta. He's already getting inquiries from other parts of COUNTRY Financial that haven't yet started working this way eager to get started. He's not surprised by the interest.

"COUNTRY Financial is a 93-year-old company. We provide great services to a million households, and we have for many, many years," said Hildestad. "So it's really fun to be part of that. But then to see us changing along with the world around us, whether it's through digitization or new product sets, that makes it really fun to come to work."