

Twelve Questions Answered About my Role as IT Manager at Natren Probiotics

IT Manager /Systems Administrator

Natren Probiotics

Oct 2017 – Sep 2018 (1 year)

Westlake Village, CA

1. How did you get this job? What does the company do? Who buys its products or services?

I was approached by the HR Manager through Indeed. The timing was perfect as I was just finishing up a short-term gig with Valley Presbyterian Hospital to assist in their migration to the cloud. Natren was in a hurry because their long-time IT Manager had decided to go elsewhere. I had one phone interview, one on-site interview and a final interview with the owners all within two or three days. They made the offer on the spot and I started within a few days. I had less than two weeks of transition from the previous IT Manager, whose main job was to take care of the aging HP ProLiant servers and to keep the site radio links operational.

Natren is a privately held \$12 million probiotics manufacturing company with three locations located in Westlake Village CA. Natren considers itself the original manufacturer of probiotic products and still ships them cold today touting the live nature of the bacteria. Their main customers are health-food stores, Vitamin Shoppe, Whole Foods, Amazon, Costco, anywhere vitamins are sold. They have been around for 35 years and ran their business very much as a hands-on “mom and pop” shop with old technology that they expected to last forever. They knew they needed to eventually upgrade their systems. I was brought in to do that.

2. What are your major responsibilities? What have been the biggest challenges you faced in accomplishing them? What did you do, and how did it turn out? What resulted from your actions?

I managed the IT function at Natren. It was a solo gig up until the last month or two before I left. Like most of my positions as the IT Manager, I was responsible for the uptime of the network, for keeping the equipment functioning optimally and for recommending updates and replacements for the aging servers and switches. Natren had decided to close the sales location that housed the data center, so I was tasked with building a new data center at the manufacturing facility a mile away. They had previously been connected by point-to-point radio links that were constantly failing. One of my first projects was to get each location linked to Frontier FiOS for as the primary ISP and to Spectrum cable for backup. With the help of a local MSP, we built a much needed 100% reliable network.

The biggest challenge in accomplishing what I had been asked to do – build out a new data center – was in explaining the need for almost each new piece of technology to a very-much hands-on owner who loved to manage projects that had to do with manufacturing their products, but had a hard time understanding the need for a new rack, new servers, new switches, new UPS units and new operating systems. With time I was able to help him understand the need to upgrade his old equipment and the infeasibility of expecting to move all the equipment in one night and have it working the next day. He finally got it but it took a lot of patient explaining in terms he could understand.

It all turned out well. We were able to retire the dozen ten-year old HP Servers with three new Dell ProLiant hosts, and virtualize the servers, converting from server 2003 to server 2016 and 2012 R2. We hosted our own Exchange, DC's, file and print servers, and the RP system – MS Dynamics Great Plains 2015 on MS SQL 2012. Eventually we migrated to O365 E3 just as I was leaving. Canoga Perkins had recruited me and needed me to start right away. I trained my replacement and helped him finish the project with lots of phone calls and emails over the next few months. In the end, they were able to close the old location and save tons of money from not having to maintain that building or the associated infrastructure.

3. What are you most proud to have accomplished in this role?

I came on board to work with an obviously dying set of servers and a network infrastructure that was failing almost every day (the point-to-point radio links).

The IT room was surrounded by fans, placed there by my predecessor because the temperature would reach 97 degrees in the summertime. I brought this company from the verge of catastrophe, including a failed LTO backup in place, to a fully modern and totally supported virtual environment in an air-conditioned, four-hour UPS supported virtual environment with the latest version of VMWare and a SAN that should last them for years to come even if they doubled their VMs.

4. How have you saved your employer time or increased productivity?

The biggest savings was in the area of lost productivity due mainly to the lost connectivity when employees in the manufacturing facility could not reach the servers in the sales building because of yet another failed radio connection. I also was responsible for managing the project to move the data center, allowing them to close the now unneeded building and consolidate staff in the manufacturing center, in proximity to where the critical action took place in the company.

5. What have you done, to increase sales or revenue for your employer? How did you go about doing it? What tools, skills, knowledge, or software did you utilize?

My efforts in modernizing their data center allowed them to expand their CRM system without fear of having it fail because it was running on old and dying equipment. I moved their ERP system to a modern physical server and placed it in a virtual environment. Performance was measurably improved by the network infrastructure I put into place. I worked closely with new marketing folks they brought on board coordinating the technical aspects of converting to online orders with same day processing instead of weekly shipments to the stores.

6. What have you done, and how did you do it, to decrease costs or expenses for your employer? Again, what tools, skills, knowledge, or software did you utilize?

The cost of lost productivity from failed infrastructure can not always be measured. But it is clear a more reliable data center prevented outages that were common and costly for many years before I came on board for this project.

7. How have your accomplishments in this role stacked up against others in your department, company, or industry?

Although you would have to ask my boss directly, he was lavish in his praise for what I was able to accomplish in less than a year with the company. A going-away party and private luncheon with the owners in which they express their thanks is to me evidence that I did my job well and have skills that are valuable to others.

8. Why is your employer better off because you were hired?

Natren is still in business because they were able to reduce costs by closing the large and mostly empty sales facility. They could not have done that if I had not helped them move the data center out of the building being closed. They are now well-positioned for growth as they transition sales mainly from the large retail stores to direct Internet sales. They are still able to compete with live probiotics in spite of competitors who claim live bacteria is not necessary to good gut health.

9. What did you start or set up that became a model for others to copy in other locations or companies?

Because we setup the data center to be self-sufficient, needing little to almost no physical access, the company was able to outsource their IT support to a managed service provider. I salvaged a dying relationship with their phone system vendor and helped them take advantage of the many features of the system they did not previously utilize. I still use that same model phone system with my employer today. What I started was the idea that vendor relationships can be salvaged if properly managed and with the right kind of communication.

10. How did you make life easier for your boss, your peers, or others with whom you worked?

I did my homework. I made sure my boss understood in language more familiar to him, the technical aspects of this highly complex data center migration.

11. How are you viewed by your boss, peers, and those you supervise?

I am confident my boss and peers would provide solid references if asked.

12. What is your reputation among your vendors, customers, or clients? Why do they have this opinion of you?

I received many compliments from the vendors with whom I worked in making this data center migration happen. I especially recall one email from a technician who thanked me for my kind words complimenting him for his excellent work on our firewalls as he configured the automatic failover between the two ISPs, which was something I could not have done without much help from the manufacturer. To this day I receive calls from this vendor asking if they can provide network support and expertise to Canoga Perkins, even though it has been 2.5 years.