



Business challenge

To continue evolving its link management platform as an enterprise-level solution, Bitly needed to team with a cloud provider offering powerful technology, global data center presence and industry expertise.

Transformation

Migrating to an IBM Cloud environment, Bitly established a highly scalable hosting platform for low-latency delivery to enterprise customers around the world. In the process, the company developed an invaluable partnership with IBM that led to collaboration on innovative new sales and marketing initiatives.



Rob Platzer
Chief Technology Officer
Bitly

Business benefits

25 billion

data-infused links

migrated from one hosting site to IBM® Bluemix® infrastructure with data center locations worldwide

1 billion

user interaction data sets

stored and managed in a flexible, cost-effective IBM Cloud Object Storage environment

Transforms

IT operations

to scale for growth, control costs and focus valuable resources on new product development

Bitly

Powering industry-leading link management for the enterprise with IBM Cloud technology

Founded in 2008, Bitly optimizes and provides intelligence on more than 300 million links and processes over nine billion clicks a month from social media, email, Short Message Service (SMS) and virtually every other digital channel. Offering branded links, mobile deep linking, omnichannel campaign tracking and real-time analytics, the firm's enterprise solution helps today's leading brands view and manage the customer experience across an increasingly complex digital landscape. An IBM Business Partner, Bitly is a privately held company with headquarters in New York, New York and offices in San Francisco, California, and Denver, Colorado.

"We looked at all of the obvious players in cloud hosting. All roads led us back to IBM Cloud."

—Rob Platzer, Chief Technology Officer, Bitly

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Demand for enterprise scale

In 2008, Bitly launched intelligent link shortening technology that quickly became the industry standard. Adopted by users to compress lengthy URLs for social media posts, web content and Short Message Service (SMS) texts, the platform also helps companies improve brand visibility, boost click-through rates and analyze user behavior online.

“Bitly was founded to solve a simple problem: the world needed shorter links,” says Bitly Chief Technology Officer Rob Platzer. “But link shortening soon became a tool for branding and building relationships with customers.”

Over the years, Bitly continued to evolve its offering to keep up with demand for cutting-edge enterprise capabilities. “In its reincarnation as an enterprise product, Bitly is a link management platform that provides data and tools to help marketers control the customer experience,” explains Platzer.

With business thriving, Bitly found that growth introduced a new set of challenges. “Bitly had been around for a while as a startup, and we saw that our customers really wanted us to become more of an enterprise company,” notes Bitly Chief Product Officer Matt Thomson. “We needed to think about scale and deliverability in a global sense.”

For Bitly, the shift to delivery at an enterprise level needed to start with its underlying IT operations. “We needed to evolve the technology infrastructure behind our platform,” says Platzer. “We were colocated in a data center environment with a single point of presence [POP]. We were procuring hardware the traditional way, buying tranches of servers and then having to live with that investment over the course of a 3-year or 4-year lease. Every time we made a technical decision and wanted to ship a new product, we would have to do some trading around internally to make it happen.”

Seeking more agile, cost-effective IT infrastructure, Bitly started planning for a cloud migration. “We were looking for a cloud-based model with pay-as-you-go pricing, the ability to scale up and scale down, a more global presence, and the ability to geodistribute into more POPs,” explains Platzer. “But a lot of our platforms have been architected for bare metal servers. Ultimately, we wanted a low-risk move to a bare metal installation that would still give us all the benefits of cloud.”

A powerful partnership

Issuing a request for proposal (RFP) for cloud infrastructure solutions, Bitly evaluated offerings from leading global providers. “We looked at all of the obvious players in cloud hosting,” says Platzer. “All roads led us back to IBM Cloud.”

The IBM Bluemix platform offered powerful bare metal server technology and data center locations worldwide, providing the high-performance hosting solution Bitly needed to support continuing growth as enterprise. Plus, the start-up greatly appreciated the IBM team’s responsiveness and interest in forming a strategic partnership.

“With IBM, there was a relentless effort to make this work,” notes Platzer. “A partnership opportunity started to open—we saw an opportunity to have a deeper relationship with IBM through the cloud engagement. We were starting to get introductions and have key conversations early on.”

After establishing an agreement with IBM to migrate its entire infrastructure—including its platform of 25 billion data-infused links—to a Bluemix hosting environment, Bitly needed to move quickly.

“Once we made the arrangements to depart our previous data center, we had a fixed timeline. It was a very, very complicated move for us,” says Platzer. “We have hundreds of microservices. We were running on hundreds of servers and processing billions of messages and pieces of data every minute. But we got tremendous support from the IBM Cloud team throughout the entire migration process. There were people who were real heroes for us, who were on calls and deployments with us days and nights.”

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—Rob Platzer, Chief Technology Officer, Bitly

Following the successful infrastructure migration to an IBM Cloud data center in Washington DC, Bitly began evaluating additional locations. “We’re in the process of architecting to geodistribute our infrastructure, and we’re working to identify which additional IBM Cloud data centers to move into,” explains Platzer. “First, we want to virtualize some of our stateless equipment and then isolate one or two data centers that give us the most impact and spin up our edge servers there.”

A timely partnership between IBM and virtualization leader VMware to launch the IBM Cloud for VMware Solutions portfolio presented Bitly with an ideal platform for running a virtualization proof of concept (POC). “IBM announced its VMware partnership, and we jumped right into testing,” says Platzer. “We got some developer licenses and ran a 1-month POC verifying that we could virtualize a number of hosts on top of bare metal servers and get the performance we need.”

Along with virtualizing key workloads, Bitly wanted to deploy a more flexible storage platform for its expanding infrastructure. Adopting the IBM Cloud Object Storage

service, the company established a highly scalable solution to more easily and cost-effectively manage its rapidly growing data environment, which includes over one billion data sets associated with Bitly user interactions.

Working closely throughout the infrastructure transformation, Bitly and IBM discussed additional opportunities to strategically integrate products and services. “IBM is exceptionally good at providing partner management so that, as a startup, we don’t get lost in the larger organization,” comments Thomson. “We had outstanding support in getting introductions across IBM and building connections across departments. On both sides, we were working to make a vendor deal into a larger strategic partnership.”

In ongoing conversations about the IBM Watson® Campaign Automation platform, Bitly and IBM zeroed in on a win-win business scenario. “We identified a joint need in the sense that the IBM marketing tool in the cloud had some SMS delivery functionality, but it wasn’t providing metrics on the SMS messages yet,” says Thomson. “Our links can do that. And for us, it was about strategically building momentum around having Bit links in SMS messaging.”

IBM connected Bitly with the optimal team for executing on the vision and the project advanced quickly. “Typically it’s about a 3-month process just to work through

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business development with a partner,” notes Thomson. “But we immediately started to work with IBM developers and pushed something out within 2 – 3 months from there. It was that quick winnowing down to somebody who could execute that was really important for us.”

The collaborative relationship between Bitly and IBM is leading to additional possibilities for innovation. “In the world of a startup, sequencing things in the right timeframe is very important—you can’t do everything at once,” says Thomson. “One thing we’ve held aside as an asset is our data, and now we’re talking to IBM about what the cool new use cases are for this.”

Ideas include an initiative that would incorporate Bitly data into IBM sales efforts targeting online users. “We see about 260 million users five times or more a month, meaning that a single user will click on five or more Bit links—whether they know it or not—in a month,” explains Thomson. “So we’re looking at data from potential IBM buyers that have clicked on a stream of different links

in the B2B [business-to-business] world and working on a POC that would bring this data into the IBM real-time buying platform for online media.”

Additionally, Bitly anticipates continuing to evolve its offerings with cognitive technology and has been exploring IBM Watson services in POC environments. “Bitly is processing a huge amount of audience data, and the next level for us is to make it more actionable,” says Platzer. “The strategy is to start to add cognitive augmentation to make our data even more valuable and then pipeline that data to places where our customers can best use it.”

A night-and-day transformation

Shifting from a traditional data center environment to IBM Cloud hosting infrastructure proved profoundly transformative for Bitly’s IT operations. “The difference is like night and day,” says Platzer. “We can spin configurations of chassis up within our 4-hour SLA [service level agreement] instead of a 6-week lead time. We can rack and stack a server by clicking a button, have it up and running in hours, pay for it month to month, and spin it back down if we need to reduce capacity.”

The flexible Bluemix technology provides significant cost benefits for the growing company. “The ability to scale up and down allows us to

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—Bob Lord, Chief Digital Officer, IBM

control costs much more precisely,” notes Platzer. “If we have a product feature that isn’t used a lot and costs a lot of money, we can clearly measure that in a way we couldn’t before. We can spin it down and claim that cost very quickly, which has a huge impact on managing the business from a financial perspective.”

With the IBM Cloud platform’s preconfigured infrastructure options, Bitly reduces time spent on administrative tasks and refocuses its IT resources on higher-value activities. “Being able to move to new hardware that’s configured exactly the way we want it for each particular microservice is a huge win for us,” explains Platzer. “We’ve seen a massive reduction in time spent by our own engineers resolving resource utilization issues, hardware issues, hardware failures, or general alerting and system resource limits. We spend less time fixing problems, more time developing new product.”

Additionally, Bluemix infrastructure provides the data center presence and powerful network Bitly needs to support low-latency delivery to virtually any location around the world. “Seventy percent of Bitly’s

traffic is international—we see nine billion clicks a month and just under seven billion of them come from outside the United States,” says Platzer. “The ability to have 46 POPs all connected by a high-speed fiber network is extremely attractive to us.”

Teaming with IBM not only provides the high-performance hosting platform Bitly needs to accommodate its expanding operations but also offers invaluable connections and support for continuing to evolve as a business. “We had to build a sturdier infrastructure for scalability across the enterprise—that was number one, just trying to solve the problem of growing up, really,” notes Thomson. “But the other objective for us is trying to build strategic channel partnerships, so the fact that IBM has this strategic side is a huge benefit and a bonus.”

Creating advantageous networks is an essential focal point for the IBM Business Partner program. “By introducing companies like Bitly to similar industry partners, we become a kind of broker of new relationships around solutions running on IBM Cloud,” says IBM Business Development Executive Amanda Stout. “IBM itself can be a consumer of the technologies, but we can also bring companies together in a way that adds value and creates a mutually beneficial partnership. It’s all about connecting partners with each other and with IBM to work in new and inventive ways.”

Bitly’s collaboration with IBM on innovative joint initiatives has been a unique experience for the business. “As a startup, the worst thing in the

world is to take up lots of time with a large company,” notes Thomson. “We found that with other players in this space, we could get kicked around from person to person for a long period of time. IBM has been the best at getting us to the right people more quickly.”

For IBM, successes with Bitly demonstrate the effectiveness of tearing down traditional boundaries and working closely with IBM Business Partners to meet customer needs and industry demands. “Our collaboration with Bitly exemplifies the way IBM and its partners can come together to create new value,” states IBM Chief Digital Officer Bob Lord. “We look forward to continuing to move this partnership forward and innovating together to win in the marketplace.”

Solution components

- IBM® Bluemix®
- IBM Cloud for VMware Solutions
- IBM Cloud Object Storage

Connect with us



Take the next step

To learn more about IBM Cloud solutions, please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit the following website: ibm.com/cloud-computing

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