

Moving Beyond VMware: A Swanson, Martin & Bell Case Study

How the nationally recognized law firm reduced monthly cloud costs by
20–25% with US Signal OpenCloud.

When a midyear increase caused Swanson, Martin & Bell's cloud costs to rise sharply, the Chicago-based law firm knew it needed a more predictable path forward. But lowering costs was only part of the goal. The firm also wanted to simplify infrastructure management, reduce its dependence on a single virtualization platform, and preserve the reliability attorneys and staff needed to serve clients.

The firm moved its primary data center from a VMware-based cloud environment to US Signal OpenCloud, a flexible, consumption-based cloud platform built on KVM infrastructure. OpenCloud provides scalable resources, predictable costs, and 24x7 access to US Signal cloud experts. For Swanson, Martin & Bell, the transition reduced monthly cloud costs by 20–25%, created an opportunity to strengthen network segmentation, and caused so little disruption that most users never noticed the move.

"We moved the entire platform, all of the servers in operation, over a weekend and nobody noticed. I think that's the best thing you could say."

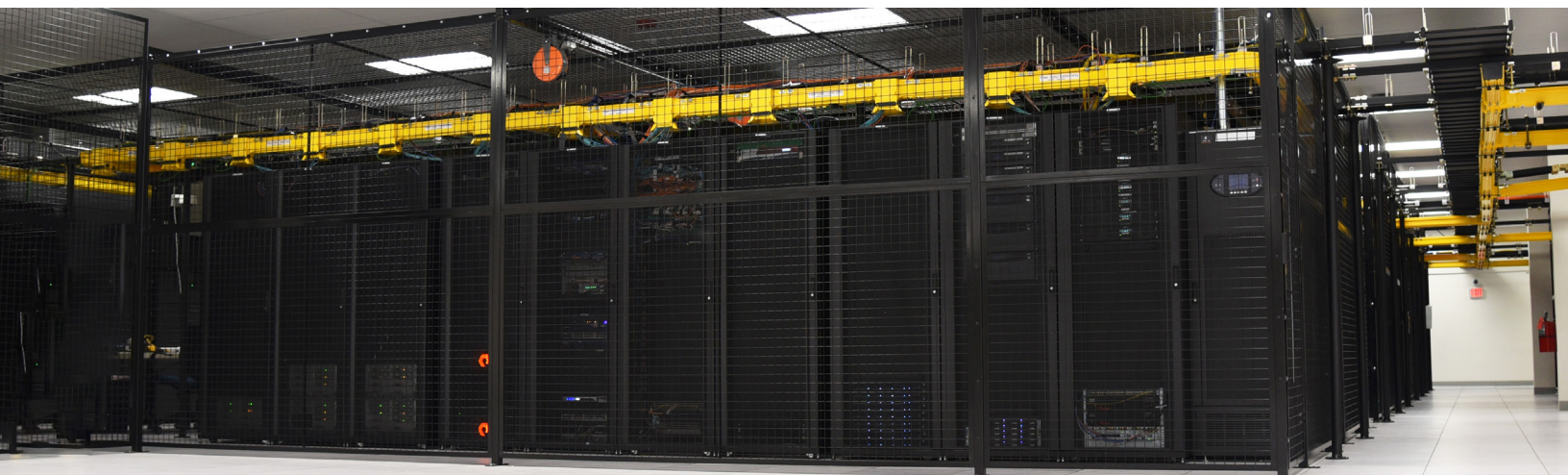
Andrew Barzyk, Information Technology Manager, Swanson, Martin & Bell, LLP

Technology That Keeps Legal Work Moving

For 21 years, Andrew Barzyk has helped set the direction of technology at Swanson, Martin & Bell. His responsibilities extend from systems and network architecture to compliance and high-level technical escalation. He evaluates new technology by looking for the right balance among performance, security, and accessibility.

That balance matters in a litigation firm. Swanson, Martin & Bell relies on standard business applications, but its most critical systems are specific to legal work. Its time and billing platform spans eight or nine servers backed by a large SQL database. Attorneys, paralegals, secretaries, and accounting staff all interact with the system, making availability directly connected to the firm's ability to bill for its work.

The firm's document management environment is equally important. It holds terabytes of information across more than 120,000 matters, along with custom databases and applications developed for litigation that does not fit a standard workflow. The IT team must protect sensitive information and meet SOC 2 and HIPAA-related requirements without making it difficult for people to do their jobs. "We have to make sure information is contained properly and that the right people have access to the right data without making them unable to work," Barzyk said.



A Sudden Cost Increase Creates an Opportunity

Swanson, Martin & Bell first moved to the cloud to reduce the burden of running its own geographically distributed data centers. Its team had been maintaining storage arrays with hundreds of drives, server hardware, firmware, power distribution units, UPS devices, cooling systems, and the replication needed to keep multiple locations available.

Moving to a VMware-based environment with US Signal removed much of that physical maintenance, but the firm still managed vSphere and other infrastructure components it no longer wanted to handle.

Then its cloud costs increased significantly in the middle of the year.

For a law firm structured as a partnership, an unexpected operating expense has a direct effect on the partners. Stable infrastructure costs help the firm plan distributions, protect staffing, and make responsible investments in the business.

“We all like to have a stable paycheck, and that’s what that is for the partnership. That’s why predictability is important to us.”

The cost increase gave the firm a reason to reassess its environment, but the timing created a larger opportunity. Its time and billing system needed an upgrade that required new servers. Instead of building those servers in the old environment and migrating them later, the firm could build them directly in US Signal OpenCloud.

The move would also allow the IT team to simplify its responsibilities and pay for the capabilities it actually used.

“VMware is a great system, but most of its features we really weren’t interested in or using,” Barzyk said. “We felt like we were still paying for them.”



Why OpenCloud Fit the Firm's Strategy

Simplicity was one of the strongest reasons Swanson, Martin & Bell chose OpenCloud. The firm could move away from managing pieces of the virtualization infrastructure and focus its time on the systems that support legal work.

The platform also aligned with Barzyk's belief in technology diversity. Swanson, Martin & Bell had historically used more than one virtualization platform because resilience involves more than multiple facilities or reliable hardware. It also means avoiding too much dependence on any one vendor.

OpenCloud's KVM foundation gave the firm a widely used platform that Barzyk already knew from his experience with Linux. That familiarity helped him evaluate the platform with confidence and recommend it to the firm's partners.

"The partners trust me, and I don't want to betray that trust by pushing a platform and then finding out we're going to have all kinds of problems with it," he said.

The existing relationship with US Signal was another deciding factor. The firm had worked with the US Signal migration and support teams during its earlier move from on-premises infrastructure to the VMware cloud.

"The Help Desk is fantastic," Barzyk said. "We know people on the Help Desk. It's nice to have a face and a name, and you can pick up the phone and call them 24x7 for help."



One Migration, Two Approaches

The migration plan divided the firm's workloads into two groups. Servers that would have been difficult or unnecessary to rebuild moved directly to OpenCloud. These included systems nearing retirement, complex databases, and applications where combining a platform move with operating system or SQL changes would have introduced avoidable risk.

Other servers were built fresh in OpenCloud. New file servers allowed the firm to upgrade operating systems, replicate the data, and cut over during a planned weekend. The new time and billing environment was also built directly in OpenCloud while the existing system continued operating.

US Signal worked with the firm to run both environments during the transition without charging it twice. That gave the IT team time to build, test, migrate, and cut over each workload according to its needs.

The move also supported a broader security objective. Swanson, Martin & Bell used the migration to create additional VLANs, separate more servers, and restrict communication to the specific ports each system required. Instead of recreating the old network, the team advanced its move toward a zero-trust model.

"Doing a migration is sort of like doing a brake job while you're going down the expressway.

This gave us an opportunity to plan it out, incorporate the changes into the move, and make it a lot less painful."

Solving Challenges Without Slowing the Business

The migration was not entirely without challenges. During the firewall cutover, the team encountered a routing issue with its Microsoft Always On VPN environment. Rather than entering a lengthy escalation process with a large vendor, the firm called US Signal and worked directly with an experienced support engineer.

The routing issue was resolved in approximately 30 minutes.

“That would have taken weeks to figure out in the Microsoft world,” Barzyk said. “Here, we picked up the phone, talked to someone from a higher tier of support, and worked it out in about half an hour.”

The firm also encountered an early compatibility issue while building Windows Server 2025 workloads on KVM. Swanson, Martin & Bell was among the first customers moving to the new OpenCloud environment because it needed to begin building its upgraded billing system. Running the old and new environments in parallel allowed the team to work with US Signal on the issue without putting the existing system at risk.

“We were on the bleeding edge, and we were okay with it not working because we were still running the old system,” Barzyk said. “We worked through the issues with the Help Desk, and in the end, it all worked out great.”



Lower Costs With Minimal User Impact

Swanson, Martin & Bell moved the servers supporting its primary data center to OpenCloud over a weekend. The firm scheduled approximately two hours of downtime for the server cutover. The later firewall transition took place during a regular preventative maintenance window.

Most attorneys and staff never noticed that the infrastructure beneath their applications had changed. The accounting team did notice one difference: the bill was lower.

"We saved about 20 to 25 percent a month," Barzyk said. "We actually got a phone call asking, 'What's going on here? The bill isn't as high as it normally is.'"

The results went beyond immediate savings. Swanson, Martin & Bell gained more predictable infrastructure costs, reduced the amount of virtualization infrastructure its own team had to manage, and added platform diversity to its cloud strategy. The firm also strengthened its network design during the transition instead of carrying old complexity into a new environment. Just as important, the firm retained access to a support team that understands how much downtime costs a legal practice.

"Every minute we're down, people aren't billing and we're losing money," Barzyk said. "You have to have somebody you trust for support, and you have to know you can pick up the phone and get things resolved quickly. Relationship is everything."

Stability Comes From Having Options

For IT leaders concerned about rising VMware costs, Barzyk recommends evaluating more than the price of an alternative platform. A stable technology strategy also considers how dependent the organization has become on a single vendor and how quickly it can respond when that vendor changes direction.

"Reliability isn't just having multiple data centers and making sure the hardware is good," he said. "It's also having multiple platforms."

Swanson, Martin & Bell used its move to OpenCloud to address a sudden cost increase while making broader improvements to its environment. The firm lowered its monthly cloud costs, simplified infrastructure management, strengthened its security architecture, and moved its primary data center with minimal disruption to the people who rely on it.

For Barzyk, that combination is what makes the move a success.