

How an NYC-Based University Boosted Backup Reliability While Slashing Costs

Learn how N2W supports St. John's University, which educates more than 20,000 students and employs over 1,400 staff, using a hybrid environment.



ST. JOHN'S
UNIVERSITY

LOCATIONS

Queens, NY
Manhattan, NY
Rome, Italy
Paris, France
Limerick, Ireland

FOUNDED IN
1870

NUMBER OF END USERS
20,000+

NUMBER OF CLOUD SERVERS
~300

WEBSITE
<https://www.stjohns.edu/>

The organization

St. John's University, based in New York City, educates more than 20,000 students and employs approximately 1,410 academic staff. The institution relies on a complex, hybrid technological environment, which includes cloud-based servers mixed with on-prem resources. Amazon Web Services (AWS) is St. John's primary cloud platform, but the ability to support additional clouds is also important, especially as the institution continues its pivot toward a cloud-centric approach to IT strategy. They want to be able to operate multiple cloud accounts to segment resources.

The challenge: "Everything was very risky" due to legacy backup solutions

Until recently, St. John's relied on a data backup and recovery strategy that was stuck in the past. Its primary means of backing up data was tape drives, which it shipped to a third-party site for storage. While this approach might have been sufficient decades ago, it fell far short of meeting modern data protection needs for the university's cloud environment, for several reasons. One was that the tape backups didn't cover all systems, meaning that some data was not being protected. "It was very difficult for us to track everything," says George Philippakos, Sr. Systems Analyst at St. John's. "It was hit or miss."

Recovery times were also very poor due to the need to ship tapes back on-site before recovery could begin. Combined with the inability to test or validate tape-based backup data to ensure that it would actually be recoverable, this setup resulted in "recoverability that was really bad," Philippakos says. He adds that meeting Recovery Time Objective (RTO) and Recovery Point Objective (RPO) goals was a constant challenge.

Keeping backup costs in check was a persistent issue, too. For example, manual auditing revealed that the institution was still storing some backup data that was fifteen years old —far too dated to be useful for recovery or compliance purposes. Yet, due to poor visibility into backups and lack of built-in cost reporting capabilities, St. John's was still paying to store this data. In short, as Philippakos says, "everything was risky" in terms of data protection.

Modernizing data protection with results from day one

Searching for a way to improve the reliability, manageability, and cost-efficiency of its backup and recovery strategy, St. John's began experimenting with N2W—a solution that an AWS engineer had introduced to the university during a consulting project designed to help the institution modernize its cloud strategy.

Philippakos says that N2W's value was "instant," and it was "easy to deploy," thanks especially to assistance from the N2W team who helped to configure backup and data lifecycle policies tailored to St. John's needs. And Philippakos added, "the support is second to none."

For the university, being able to back up and recover data without relying on legacy, tape-based storage was just one of the advantages of switching to N2W. St. John's also benefits from a range of advanced capabilities. These include the flexibility to back up and recover data in multiple ways, which makes it easy to address varying use cases. "For us it's critical to be able to do an EC2-level, storage volume-level and file-level backup."

Likewise, the ability to back up cloud configurations alongside applications and data is very powerful. "There is a lot of configuration that goes into EC2, and N2W is able to back it all up for us," according to Philippakos. As a result, he adds, "we can quickly clone servers," which is useful not just for recovery scenarios, but also for creating dev/test environments that mimic production. N2W's cost optimization features, too, have proven very valuable for St. John's. "As a university, our budgets are always tight," Philippakos explains. **"Having eyes on our costs is a great feature."**

"N2W has been a blessing from day one. It's a crucial part of our cloud presence and has proved to be invaluable. From lost files to accidentally stopped instances, it has saved us numerous times from a potential disaster. I can say that with certainty!"

George Philippakos, Sr. Systems Analyst

Saving the day many times over

N2W has already saved the day for St. John's on multiple occasions. For instance, Philippakos recalls an incident when he accidentally deleted several EC2 instances that he thought were no longer in use. It turned out that he was mistaken; five minutes later, he received a call informing him that a critical service had gone down. "I thought I might lose my job," he says. But thanks to N2W, **"I had the servers back up and running literally within three minutes."**

Philippakos also says that N2W has proven critical on several other occasions where employees accidentally deleted data. In those cases, the ability to perform file-level recovery allowed the IT team to restore the lost data quickly and easily.

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