

# Apartments.com

Apartments.com offers renters one of the most comprehensive databases of millions of apartments around the United States. By incorporating the most relevant products to reach renters, including personalized searches, walk-through video demonstrations, live chat, a mobile website and apps for both iPhone and Android phones, Apartments.com delivers the multimedia experience renters want while creating easy access to listings from any computer or mobile device.

## Overview

In addition to serving renters nationwide, Apartments.com is a leading advertising destination for professional property managements companies, private landlords and classified listings. Apartments.com is a division of Chicago-based Classified Ventures, LLC. The Apartments.com network of rental websites includes Apartment Home Living and Rental Homes Plus. Other divisions of Classified Ventures include Cars.com and HomeGain.com. Classified Ventures, LLC is a strategic joint-venture owned by five large media partners—A. H. Belo Corp. (NYSE: AHC), Gannett Company Inc. (NYSE: GCI), The McClatchy Company (NYSE: MNI),

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### MATT STRATTON

Director, Technology Operations  
Apartments.com

Tribune Company and The Washington Post Company (NYSE: WPO).

## Challenge

With over six million visitors to the site every month, Apartments.com is the #1 online rental search destination. To maintain its competitive advantage, the company is heavily reliant on its technology team to rapidly develop and release new features and services. This team quickly saw the need to adopt agile methodology to meet its business needs.

The technology team is divided into separate groups that support the consumer-facing website, which is the flagship product, as well as the data warehouse, customer tools, and marketing and branding product lines. Each group typically does two-week sprints and has their own release plans and deployment schedules.

“In our business, we can’t afford to have 18 month projects for new features. That’s an eternity in the online world,” said Matt Stratton, Director, Technology Operations at Apartments.com. “For instance, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and our placements within search engines are critical to our business. Given how quickly search engine algorithms change, when our SEO analysts want changes made to the website to help drive more organic traffic, we have to be able to make those changes immediately,” he added.



## At a Glance

### ■ Industry

Real Estate

### ■ Location

United States

### ■ Challenge

The organization needed a solution that could automatically deploy new features and services.

### ■ Solution

Use the release management solution for standardized, automated, and simpler release processes.

### ■ Results

- + Provided the ultimate buy vs. build justification for ITSM
- + Offered automated deployments
- + Came with prebuilt workflows that can be easily configured

While the automated deployment of new features and services was a 'nice-to-have' in the days when organizations used the waterfall development method, Apartments.com found that it was an absolute essential in an Agile development environment. "How can you have a two-week sprint and then take three days to deploy an application or new feature? We were very good at creating new products, but we needed to get better at how we managed the releases of these products. It doesn't do the business any good if no one gets to use them," said Mr. Stratton.

In the past, all application deployments, including those in Quality Assurance (QA) environments, were managed by the operations team as that was the only way to be certain that the same application that got rolled into QA would get released into production. The development team would provide the operations team with all the documentation necessary for releasing the application. However, at times a step could be missed inadvertently—either by the development or operations teams—resulting in costs to the business. This led the company to look for a solution that would facilitate consistent and automated deployments across all environments.

## Solution

The team initially considered building a deployment solution. They evaluated using Team Foundation Build and considered writing their own scripts. However, they concluded that they needed to focus on their primary business goal—creating a stellar website experience for apartment hunters—and outsource the release automation solution development. The Apartments.com team considered a Microsoft-centric solution that involved creating MSI packages and having their developers create installers. They also evaluated other products that helped move files across environments, but these solutions were incapable of taking into consideration the environmental differences.

"After consulting Gartner Research, we discovered that Serena (now part of Micro Focus) was considered to be a leading product in the release management space," said Mr. Stratton. In response, Apartments.com embarked on a proof-of-concept with the release management solution. They discovered that while it was a new tool to learn, it could handle the rapid release of small changes, much like they needed it to. It helped them create standardized, automated and far simpler processes that matched the way they wanted to manage releases.

"By automating deployments, we are certain that the only way an application got into a QA environment was through the deployment tool. As a result, we were assured that an application behaves in exactly the same manner regardless of it living in a QA or production environment. The only difference is in the destination and the parameters for the environment. We are now guaranteed quick and consistent deployments without requiring team members to manage this extra step for a successful release," said Mr. Stratton.

At the same time, the team evaluated various IT Service Management (ITSM) solutions. "Most of the traditional ITSM offerings that we evaluated focus on the service desk and on end-user support and do not adequately address the needs of organizations where the applications are the business," said Mr. Stratton. They also considered Microsoft System Center Service Manager but found they would incur significant implementation costs to make it work the way they wanted it to. Service Manager came with prebuilt workflows that could be easily configured to meet their needs. "Service Manager provided us with the ultimate buy vs. build justification for ITSM.

The connectivity into release automation was an advantage. The combination represents the ultimate orchestration story," said Mr. Stratton.

The transition from a waterfall method of developing and releasing services to an agile methodology gave Apartments.com time to pause and re-evaluate how they handled service requests and other aspects of IT Service Management (ITSM). The company had previously used TeamTrack, the predecessor to the process management platform that powers Micro Focus Service Manager, for defect tracking. However, over the years they had come to shoehorn incident management, for instance, into this defect tracking implementation. The transformation initiative gave them the opportunity to take a fresh look at how they handled requests that inevitably translated into a release of a new or updated application, feature or service.

## Results

Apartments.com was able to implement Micro Focus Service Request Manager and go live with incident management, service request management and release automation in just six weeks. The initial implementation of Service Request Manager has 15 services available to users. Unlike a traditional service desk where the typical services include handling requests for a new phone or a printer for an employee, the request center at Apartments.com serves as the portal to its technologies and products for the rest of the business. Their list of standard services primarily address the common requests that come from their customer services, sales department and development teams—for instance, requests to on-board a new partner or customer, set up a new feed for a partner, make changes to an ad or the website on behalf of a customer, grant access to custom applications, provide developers with access to certain environments or develop a new product or service. "The business runs more efficiently now that there is a single point of contact for all their requests—the Service Request Manager. The Technology Services team serves as the 'insulation' between the agile development teams and

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the business. It triages the requests, does the 'Rosetta Stone' translation of these requests and routes them to the right development teams along with the relevant information so that they are addressed immediately," said Mr. Stratton. "Feedback thus far has been extremely positive. The customer services and sales teams find the new Service Request Manager extremely easy to use," he added.

"This is the year that we will lay down all the 'plumbing' required to streamline the request-to-release process. We are doing the two book-ends—request and incident management and release automation—and working our way

toward the middle. There is a clear distinction between release and deployment. We want to get to a level of maturity in release management where the agile development teams are responsible for releases and for all the steps leading up to a deployment, and the production operations teams take it from there," said Mr. Stratton. Apartments.com sees the process management platform that powers these solutions functioning as the "process orchestration bus", helping manage the entire request-to-release process.

In the next phase, the Apartments.com team will tackle change and configuration management

in greater depth. "Release Automation needs to be a priority within development and operations teams. As a best practice, you have to set goals around automating a certain number of deployment pieces per quarter. Strategically, it makes everyone's life easier, but you need a skilled evangelist to entice teams to commit to this. Make sure to build in checkpoints to ensure continuous improvement. Good metrics include those that help you track a reduction in the deployment time and measure effectiveness, for instance, the number of attempts it takes to successfully release an application or service," concluded Mr. Stratton.

**“Serena (now part of Micro Focus) Service Manager provided us with the ultimate buy vs. build justification for ITSM. The connectivity into release automation was an advantage. The combination represents the ultimate orchestration story.”**

**MATT STRATTON**

Director, Technology Operations  
Apartments.com

[www.microfocus.com](http://www.microfocus.com)



**Micro Focus**

**UK Headquarters**

United Kingdom  
+44 (0) 1635 565200

**U.S. Headquarters**

Rockville, Maryland  
301 838 5000  
877 772 4450

Additional contact information and office locations:

[www.microfocus.com](http://www.microfocus.com)