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> Restaurant giant feasts on virtualisation benefits

Popular wisdom says that you can't have your cake and eat it too. But it seems the spectacular success of virtualisation has consigned this idiomatic proverb to the past, where once IT cost savings meant functional compromise. Using VMware vSphere 4, Restaurant Brands, with ICT partner Lexel Systems, radically improved server and backup performance at a cost similar to replacing a standard server platform.

CHALLENGE: MINIMISING RISK, BUT NOT OPTIONS

Safeguarding business information is a strategic imperative. Protection is one thing, but getting back information quickly is another. While redundancy is at the core of the matter, virtualisation delivers the necessary platform fluidity. On this backdrop, the spotlight shifted to Restaurant Brands' aging server platform. Redundancy was the primary issue – when a server broke it could sometimes take an entire day to provision a working replacement. The company also felt its tape backup regime was wanting.

Famous for iconic convenience food brands KFC, Pizza Hut and Starbucks Coffee, Restaurant Brands' IT considerations spanned a three-to-five year growth period. Restaurant

Brands IS manager Kerry Cross, whose team supports 60 corporate head office IT users and over 200 outlets, says a significant number of the company's 15 servers were nearing end-of-life, which put further impetus behind an infrastructure overhaul. "Our initial focus was streamlining backup and managing it ourselves, but when we investigated virtualisation a light went on."

"We're a 24x7 operation, and finding the right partner was critical. We selected Lexel, and it was the right decision." said Kerry Cross, IS Manager, Restaurant Brands



BUSINESS IT NEEDS

Disk centric backup, server redundancy, and a scalable production server platform

The initial aim was remodelling backup infrastructure so that Kerry Cross and his team could manage backup and recovery in-house, where it could be significantly streamlined and liberated from its tape-only confines. The decision spotlighted a SAN-based system that would minimise backup windows and accelerate file restoration. The necessary server platform refresh raised the opportunity for virtualisation and a virtual production server platform, which would ideally be achieved at a ballpark cost similar to a standard like-with-like server modernisation programme.

More than simply core virtualisation and a SAN installation, the job required backup design and implementation, application installs including; MailMarshal, Web Marshal, FTP services, P2V process and server rebuilds, and core network switch design. The programme had to work on a turnkey basis, respectful of unencumbered head office business as usual performance requirements.

LEXEL'S SOLUTION

Lexel consulting, architecture, procurement and professional services; HP servers and SAN; VMware vSphere 4 virtualisation platform management.

Restaurant Brands' re-architected backup environment is spearheaded by an HP EVA4400 SAN solution. No longer solely reliant on tape backup and third-party removal and management, all production system C drives – server operating systems – are backed up to the SAN and, later, to tape, which also functions as the primary destination for data files. The setup, which includes an HP Tape Backup Library, allows virtual server restoration onto practically any platform in Restaurant Brands' newly virtualised production environment.

The head office production server platform is now a shadow of its former self, with three HP DL380 servers

replacing 15 standard servers. VMware data recovery functionality provides cold standby capacity, facilitating rapid restores in the event of server failure. This is supplemented with Symantec Backup on the tape library for static point in time backups.

Lexel engineers and project management took just three weeks to configure install hardware, and replicate servers in the VMware production server environment. Spanning mostly Wintel servers, the changeover also included a theoretically unsupported SCO UNIX server running an Informix database, and Lexel worked closely with third parties to incorporate this into the solution.

Kerry Cross said Restaurant Brands vetted a selection of vendors and even considered outsourcing, which was discounted for its reliance on data connections and relatively poor cost benefit outcomes. However, Lexel's offering shone through.

"We were so pleased with the initial engagement that the project was expanded and became a strategic overhaul," he says. "Technology isn't just about price. Some vendors pitch very low prices, but when you ask the hard questions it's clear they don't really know what they're talking about. There's not much point spending money on kit that you can't use because it's obsolete in a few months, or not fit for purpose. Lexel delivers on their promises. They are a great bunch of people – nothing's too much of an issue and they're easy to get hold of," said Kerry Cross.

BIG WINS

Immediate server provisioning

Provisioning new servers is now an exercise involving just mouse clicks. When applications and operating systems float above physical servers, capacity is effectively liquefied and can be managed accordingly. The characteristic fluidity has been especially beneficial for testing and development, said Leon Wright.

“Creating a duplicate machine is possible in the blink of an eye. Testing changes before they are re-introduced to the production environment is easier. We’ve always had a test environment, but it wasn’t identical hardware – if you’ve got a grunty server you’re not going to buy another one just so you can do your testing on it.”

Redundancy and disaster recovery capability

Restaurant Brands' virtualised platform delivers true enterprise redundancy. Instead of waiting hours for system and data restores, VMware cold standby capacity facilitates rapid operating systems rebuilds and application data reloading. Recovery time is application dependent, however in some instances it can be just minutes. Now with effectively vanilla server capacity replacing multiple standalone servers, backed up virtual machines can be reactivated in the production environment in minutes.

Standard server price, virtualised server benefits

Leon Wright said virtualisation is cheaper in the long run.

“Business analysis gauged the cost of server replacement and it actually worked out cheaper to virtualise than replace servers over the three-year period. That was the justification – never mind the benefits of virtualisation.”

Trusted IT services availability

If IT doesn't trust data backups then the business IT supports should be distrustful of IT. In streamlining backups and introducing real computing redundancy, Restaurant Brands has effectively addressed its weakest links. It is always the so-called small things – like drivers for server fixes – that stymie IT responsiveness. “The virtual world is simpler and faster,” said Leon Wright.



Kerry Cross, IS Manager, Restaurant Brands

KEY BENEFITS OF VIRTUALISATION

- Fewer physical servers, which reduces hardware costs and solves floor space problems in the data centre
- By having each application within its own 'virtual server' you can prevent one application from impacting another application when upgrades or changes are made
- You can develop a standard virtual server build that can be easily duplicated when a new server is needed
- You can deploy multiple operating system technologies on a single hardware platform i.e. Windows Server 2003, Linux, Windows 2000, etc
- You receive greater uptime with virtual servers being easily moved between physical servers, even when running and without any impact on connected users

Lexel is a New Zealand owned provider of ICT services and solutions to business. We focus on maximising business performance by using industry leading expertise and solutions to streamline IT infrastructure. Twenty-two years in the IT business, Lexel is a known and trusted partner.

We specialise in providing solution consulting, infrastructure design, implementation, project management, outsourcing, support services and procurement. To allow us to deliver this wide range of services, Lexel Systems has partnered with the main technology providers in New Zealand and we have secured the highest level of certifications possible with each of these partners.