



HIGH STEAKS TRANSFORMATION TO A MODERN WORKPLACE

Alliance Group, a leading New Zealand farmers' co-operative exporting lamb, beef and venison to more than 65 countries, has become a global prime player through the implementation of modern workplace technology.

The Alliance brand is internationally recognised as a guarantee of both quality and food safety. With 800+ staff and 4,000 shareholders, Alliance Group is in a highly competitive market, so is focussed on maximising operational efficiencies and growing market share.

With ambitions of moving their ageing environment into the twenty first century, Alliance made the decision to embrace a modern workplace. Migrating to Microsoft 365 with Lexel Systems, Alliance transformed their business through mobility, security and collaboration.

Situation

Mid-way through 2019, Alliance faced a range of IT challenges. Their ageing fleet of laptops and desktops running Office 2010 / 2013 on Windows 8 and out-dated on-premises server infrastructure was causing headaches for the company. With the implementation of a new ERP solution imminent - change was inevitable.

The proliferation of old technology across the business had become untenable, with frustration levels across Alliance Group continuing to rise. The lack of mobility, inability to collaborate easily and unreliable, outdated technology were all contributing to the 800 strong workforces' dissatisfaction.

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OVERVIEW

The need

Alliance faced a range of IT challenges with an ageing equipment fleet, prone to regularly crashing, creating significant security gaps and the near impossibility for employees to work remotely.

The solution

Migrating to Microsoft 365 was nothing short of transformational for Alliance Group's 800 users. The team were able to adapt to working remotely with minimal loss of productivity, while gaining a significant increase in security, communication and collaboration.

The results

The impact for the business has been enormous:

- **Mobility:** Staff are able to work productively and securely from anywhere, on any device.
- **Security:** Alliance enjoys trusted, enterprise-grade threat, data and identity protection across data, devices, apps and infrastructure.
- **Collaboration:** Alliance enjoys all the benefits of M365 and Microsoft Teams, resulting in increased productivity, and seamless communication and collaboration.
- **Impact on IT:** Cloud migration has resulted in a single image with world-class security all managed in one tenant, resulting in reduced cost, complexity and risk.

way of logging into the system, communication was fragmented and getting accurate data was impossible. We had various Excel spreadsheets containing data, and each one had different figures from the next. We needed one single source of truth,” says James Dring, Chief Information Officer at Alliance.

Adding to Alliance’s challenges, their international offices in London and Singapore were running completely independent IT infrastructure. This made collaboration even more difficult; the dispersed IT model adding cost and complexity for Alliance’s IT team.

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In addition, Alliance’s ageing infrastructure was prone to crashing on an annoyingly regular basis. Plus, security was a key area of concern for Alliance’s IT team, with staff logging in on a morning shift and leaving their computer open all day. Dring elaborates, “A red flag was when we noticed one individual had logged into eight different devices, sharing his personal credentials with colleagues. Meanwhile, as we were not on the latest version of Windows, we didn’t get the latest security patches. This could have led to all sorts of business ramifications and frankly it was just bad form.”

Alliance Group envisioned a completely modern workplace offering flexible working for those who could work remotely, enhanced collaboration across the network, reliable data, more efficient operations and top-level security. Recognising Microsoft 365 as the best solution, Alliance looked for a partner to deliver exactly what it needed.

Solution

It was ICT services and solutions provider Lexel Systems who understood the heart of the problem. A lack of operational integration was the core issue. Solving that would in turn solve issues around remote collaboration and communication, data accuracy, cybersecurity and ultimately Alliance’s sustainability and growth potential in the digital era. At the end of 2019, Lexel set out to design and implement a fully integrated cloud platform based on Microsoft 365, complete with a suite of mission-critical

tools and hardware that set Alliance Group up for the future. “We left no stone unturned,” says Brett Boule, General Manager of Digital, Cloud & Hybrid IT Services (DCH) at Lexel. “Shifting the focus to the cloud was key to success for us, to provide Alliance Group with the ultimate flexibility. We designed and integrated a Microsoft 365 platform in only four weeks, transforming Alliance from an aged environment to a totally new environment.”

All of Alliance Group’s infrastructure was on-premises, carrying a steep price tag to upgrade and maintain. With Microsoft’s support all key systems were migrated to the cloud to enable the Microsoft 365 platform to scale up and down during seasonal peaks, removing the need for costly ongoing maintenance. It also enabled all mission-critical files to be stored and shared in the one place.

It’s natural for a massive undertaking of this nature to upset the apple cart. The real magic of Lexel’s solution was providing communications and support to Alliance’s teams.

“We knew that too much change done at once could potentially cause too much disruption and create confusion and resistance, so we advised Alliance on effective communication to bring their people along on the journey,” says Boule. To support this communication, Lexel introduced Microsoft Teams. The videoconferencing and file sharing app was brought in early so Lexel could manage many processes remotely, while enabling Alliance Group people to talk and share information easily. With a split head office in Invercargill and Christchurch, team members were regularly travelling between the two. The ability to still see each other face-to-face was important, and Lexel deploying Microsoft Teams was the perfect solution to maximise efficiencies while maintaining the level of connection Alliance needed.



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Flexible working was the next item on the list. Even pre-COVID, Alliance knew how valuable the ability to work remotely was to recruiting and retaining workers, providing the ability to spend more time with their families as needed while also maximising operational resilience. With one head office in Christchurch, less than a decade on from two major earthquakes, the company had first-hand knowledge of how New Zealand's natural disasters could disrupt businesses at any time.

Lexel worked with Alliance to implement Microsoft Endpoint Configuration Manager to help deliver a modern workplace and modern management to keep their devices and data secure, in the cloud and on-premise. This provided Alliance with the platform to seamlessly roll out Windows 10 to the environment, not only offering a much more stable and secure platform but providing the capability to deploy devices to Alliance Group's support teams and manage them remotely. Support staff were issued with laptops to provide greater mobility, with individual work profiles for each role built and deployed through Microsoft's Endpoint Manager solution.

Boosting Alliance's security was the last major task. Migrating its systems to the cloud meant Alliance would already benefit automatically from Microsoft's regular security updates, and new, more secure devices would also help. Lexel took things a step further by installing two-factor authentication to combat the login sharing issue. No more bad security hygiene.

“We felt we were genuinely able to partner with the Alliance team on an equal basis. The usual corporate process slows everything down, but James just removed all the handbrakes, so things were able to happen extremely quickly,” Leon Davis, Principal Consultant at Lexel says.

Results

The shift couldn't have come at a better time. Less than three months after implementation the first COVID-19 lockdown hit,

meaning the team had to adapt to remote working almost instantly.

“The benefit of the digital transformation was obvious as soon as we had to go into lockdown. Prior to the deployment of the Microsoft 365 solution, we would not have been in a position to operate efficiently from remote locations. This would have severely impacted our ability to continue to operate as an essential service so this process has been invaluable for our company,” says Dring.

“We were so impressed by how quickly our team were able to adapt to working remotely, as administration, finance and sales teams were able to pack up and continue operating from home with minimal loss of productivity. On the other hand, they were still able to have face-to-face videoconferencing meetings with stakeholders, and we had lots more ability to share documents - it didn't matter where we were.”

The benefits weren't limited to Alliance's New Zealand sites.

“By consolidating the global offices and New Zealand into one Alliance tenant, productivity has skyrocketed; communication and collaboration are now seamless,” Dring says.

“With Microsoft Teams and Office 365, all our offices worldwide now have a collaboration platform for sharing documents and video conferencing.”

Microsoft Teams meant even further improvements could continue while people were working from home.

“We had a major Enterprise Resource Planning project going on right through lockdown and we were able to do the whole thing on Teams. With the assistance of Lexel we were able to stand up a project team and complete the implementation in a very short time frame,” says Dring.

Beyond the lockdown, Alliance Group continues to use Teams for a whole host of tasks.

“We manufacture a lot of product to order, and we can now receive, process and share information about our product, such as labels and marketing collateral, via Teams,” Dring explains. “And it's saving us money on travel.”

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More accurate, real-time information is made possible thanks to Microsoft 365, which has brought everything together, enabling the environment to be viewed through one 'pane of glass'. This not only enables better decision-making, it means the business's leaders and stakeholders receive much clearer and more accurate reports. With automatic screen locking and two-factor authentication, data is also much more secure.

Meanwhile, if devices need reconfiguring or redeploying, the Microsoft Endpoint Configuration Manager with Intune device management tool makes it easy to configure equipment in real time too.

"People love it. They're no longer having machines crash and they can just sign on and work effectively from anywhere," adds Dring.

After this success, Alliance is bent on finding even more ways to build on its modern workplace. Lexel's Davis is excited about the possibilities for greater automation and reporting opened up by the use of Power BI and data analytics tools. Even more Teams functions are also in the works.

"We are now looking to retire our old voice services infrastructure and fully integrate voice IP through Microsoft Teams. Also, as there's a greater demand for traceability from consumers, we are looking to implement QR codes so that they can track product from pasture to plate. Being cloud-based really sets us up well to do this," says Dring.

"It's brought us up to where we need to be and enabled the company to go forward with its strategy as a modern business."

Mark Stokes, Corporate Account Executive at Microsoft New Zealand, believes the project is a roadmap for other organisations to explore how they too can use digital technologies to make their organisations future-fit.

"We are seeing more and more that organisations who adopt modern workplace tools are so much more successful than those who don't. Results like this speak to the power of digital technologies to enable people, growth and innovation.

If you're talking about digital transformation, this is the ultimate example."



JAMES DRING
CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER
ALLIANCE FARMERS GROUP

"In this phase we addressed options and people's experiences at their desk or mobile device. The next incremental step we're making to that is in the spaces we meet in within our offices. That's the next evolution of our communication and collaboration technology drive."



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. Thirty years in the IT business, Lexel is a known and trusted partner.

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