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Gary Moorhouse
Group IT Manager
The Stovax Group



customer review



Based at Exeter, England, Stovax Ltd was established in 1981 to design, manufacture and distribute wood-burning stoves and fireside accessories. Thirty years on, the business has grown dramatically and today the Stovax Group of companies has around four hundred employees in three business entities: Stovax Ltd, Gazco Ltd and Original Style Ltd.

The Group is the UK's largest manufacturer and distributor of stove and fireplace products, which are sold worldwide through carefully selected independent retailers and distributors.

From the Group's head office in Exeter, Gary Moorhouse, Group IT Manager, explains why the company chose Datal Advansys to plan and deliver a major migration to a virtualised environment.

What were the business drivers that led to the decision to virtualise your infrastructure?

We're heavy users of IT, with around 280 of our staff relying on our infrastructure for essential business functions such as taking and shipping customer orders. This means that the impact of an outage on our own business and the customer's can be significant. To give some examples: if we can't access our core ERP application, orders could be lost. Again, very few of our retail customers hold stock, so when they place an order, they have an actual customer expecting to receive the product. We must be able to provide dependable delivery to help them meet their obligations.

Our legacy server estate was showing its age and was increasingly

consuming too many man-hours every week on tasks ranging from patches and fixes to dealing with downtime, just to keep it functioning. There were developments we wanted to deploy to take our business forward, but we were reluctant to install new software and applications on an ageing platform. Furthermore, server sprawl had set in and we were keen to consolidate our estate onto a more manageable and agile virtualised environment.

What was the process that led to your choice of Datal Advansys to provide this new infrastructure?

We're prepared to invest in our infrastructure where it will help us to reduce risk and protect our customers' interests. We'd been considering virtualisation for some time as a way to provide the necessary resilience and agility. Even a very experienced in-house IT team like ours doesn't encounter a migration project of this nature every day and we needed to have complete confidence that the chosen provider could deliver results with minimum interruption to our business.

We had embarked on a virtualisation feasibility study and had subsequently invited three suppliers to tender for the project. However, we had reservations with all the options at that point. Datal Computing, who have looked after our Sage Line 500 software for some time, asked if Datal Advansys could give a 'no-obligation' view on what we were trying to achieve with virtualisation.

When we met the Datal Advansys team, we were impressed on several fronts. They brought a fresh perspective to the project, making suggestions for configuring and licensing the solution elements that

would help to optimise our budget. They could help us to gain additional value while giving us confidence that we could safely entrust such a major project to them.

The fact that Datal ran a similar application set within a virtualised environment in its own business gave us a unique guarantee that they would be able to provide expert support in the future. All this led to our choice of Datal Advansys over the three other contenders.

With the decision made, how did the work go forward?

We took a phased approach to moving our servers to a virtualised environment, over six months or so. In conjunction with the virtualisation project, Datal Advansys also updated our Microsoft Exchange email servers from 2003 to 2010.

Everything went according to plan and to the agreed timings. The Datal Advansys implementation team proved very knowledgeable. The way in which a supplier handles any issues is important, and their attitude and flexibility to solving any of the problems that inevitably arise in a project of this scale was first class.

Any virtualisation project requires out of hours working to avoid disruption to the business. That's understood. But Datal Advansys always went the extra mile to help us and showed great commitment to sorting out any issues.

We have a strong IT team and Datal Advansys has also helped us with skills transfer to give us the necessary knowledge. Our team worked closely alongside Datal Advansys during the design, build and delivery stages so gained in-depth knowledge of all



aspects of the solution and how to manage it long after they left.

Can you outline the topography of your new virtualised environment?

Where we used to have around twenty servers with a fixed resource and storage capability across two of the Group's eleven sites, at Stovax and Gazco, we have virtualised them onto two clusters of five servers, with two on one site and three on the other.

We have a VMware cluster at each site, predominantly for the users associated with that part of the business. Each cluster has a storage area network attached by fibre channels, which gives better scalability. All our original servers were migrated onto this new environment and the resource pools were configured to match our future processing needs rather than our historic needs.

Improved business continuity was one of your original drivers. Do you now feel in a stronger position in this respect?

Definitely. We have, in effect, mirrored our infrastructure. Software at each site replicates key services to the other site. So, for example, the ERP server in Gazco is copied to a disaster recovery server in Stovax.

Rather than relying on back-up tapes, we have real-time copies of data at both sites and all our IT is up to date and in sync. Our email, CRM and network file storage are all covered in this way. When applications come under pressure during busier times, as happens in most growing organisations, we now have the ability to flex the system resource allocation.

Should there be a problem on either site, we can invoke the back-up virtual

machines on a server-by-server basis and protect our business by providing seamless service. Having a dependable IT infrastructure means that, in turn, we can provide reliable service to our customers.

With the new environment in place for a few months now, what other benefits are you experiencing?

We can clearly see the advantages of the virtual world. In addition to improved performance to users, at a strategic company level we are in a far more secure place than we were twelve months ago and we have dramatically improved our operational agility in meeting short-term needs. We can now more easily respond to those larger "Can you just..." requests from the business.

We now have the ability to embark on new projects very rapidly, with a speed of testing and development that is invaluable. Whereas in the past we would have had to order and install new hardware, which would have taken two to three weeks, a new server can be created within a day. Similarly, in moving forward with an ERP upgrade, the new system could be built and run in parallel, without any disruption to the existing version.

You'll remember I noted our former reluctance to install and run new applications on our old infrastructure. Today, we have the freedom and confidence to implement the solutions that will support us in running an efficient business on an infrastructure that can adapt to our own evolving needs and those of the markets in which we operate.

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About Datel Advansys

The Datel name is renowned within the IT industry for delivering complex solutions across a wide range of industry sectors. With over 150 people and offices across the UK, more than 900 companies trust Datel to design implement and support their business needs.

Datel Advansys is a specialist in IT infrastructure solutions; from initial consultancy, analysis and design, training and support, through to fully outsourced hosted or remote managed services.

Datel Advansys focuses primarily on the infrastructure and office productivity tools which are core to any IT solution. Specialising in hardware configuration network design and security and on-going management, Datel Advansys' team has years of experience delivering complex solutions to both small and large enterprises.

Our approach is to work with proven best of breed vendors and products, utilising proven processes procedures and methodologies to deliver projects on time and to budget. We are determined to ensure that our customers maximise business benefit from IT, by minimising both cost and risk, increasing performance, taking advantage of innovation and therefore safeguarding the business.

The Stovax Group solution:

- Around twenty servers consolidated into a virtualised environment of IBM System X servers and IBM SAN.
- An updated email environment, from Microsoft Exchange 2003 to 2010
- VMware virtualisation software
- Expert consultancy, support and skills transfer from Datel Advansys