InformationWeek
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CurtCo Media Completes Forklift Upgrade Of IT Infrastructure

The fast-growing publishing company had a variety of systems that weren't performing well and decided to replace them all with gear from Dell.

By Darrell Dunn, InformationWeek
Feb. 22, 2006
URL: http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=180206395

A publisher of lifestyle magazines for the wealthy, CurtCo Media has been growing rapidly in the past few years, in large part due to aggressive acquisition of new publication titles. But the company's supporting IT infrastructure failed to keep pace, causing the company to experience increasing periods of downtime.

In October, CurtCo turned to IT "turn-around agent" Keith Fletcher to complete a "forklift" upgrade to the company's technology infrastructure that included standardizing on Dell for servers, network switches, storage, and desktop and laptop computers.

"E-mail was regularly off-line for a day or two every couple of weeks. File servers had fallen off-line for days at a time," Fletcher says. "It wasn't so much that they were using outmoded equipment, but less than optimal decisions had been made to bring in equipment that wasn't right for the environment. It pretty much took a forklift to correct the problems."

As a publisher of magazines such as Robb Report and Worth, CurtCo's IT demands are data intensive, but the existing infrastructure had been built to meet a more transactional intensive workload and used "retail" grade equipment, he says.

Part of the problem came from the company's fast growth and numerous acquisitions, which resulted in an IT staff with no CIO that was directed by a group of IT managers. As a result, "they didn't have a solid, viable infrastructure and what they did have was almost impossible to expand and grow."

CurtCo wanted to continue its strategy of rapid expansion, so the executive staff gave Fletcher freedom to redesign the IT department from scratch. Fletcher reviewed proposals from multiple vendors, but found the Dell platform to be superior based on a combination of price and performance.

Fletcher brought in 18 Dell PowerEdge 1850 and 2850 servers, and plans to add four more in the coming months. In addition, he installed Dell's PowerConnect network switches and a PowerVault 220S direct-attached storage system to provide 3.6 terabytes of storage capacity. The company is also replacing about 100 desktops and laptop PCs annually with Dell systems.

The deployment began in December and is now about 80% complete, he says. Disruption has been minimal and overall performance gains "enormous." Fletcher estimates that network throughput has increased 10-fold, from 30 Mbps to between 200 Mbps and 300 Mbps, with the new gear.

Even with the new infrastructure largely in place, the changes are far from over, he says. CurtCo's major data center is currently located in Malibu, Calif. Power and communications lines run along the Pacific Coast Highway, where a traffic accident could easily disrupt service, and the area also is in an earthquake zone.

So the company will trade a forklift for a moving van in the next three months to relocate the data center. Fletcher plans to spend a weekend transplanting the new infrastructure equipment to a high-reliability co-location facility in an area such as Denver or Chicago.

With most of the new equipment in place, Fletcher is now beginning an overhaul of the company's business applications software, many of which were absorbed into the company during its many acquisitions.

"A lot of these applications aren't necessarily bad, but they just were not designed for scaling with a growing company," he says. "We've seen a lot of bottlenecks, so we're going to replace all our major business applications for production, purchasing, and expense reports."