



Express Newspapers

Case Study

Express Newspapers Hits the Press with Micro Focus and MSS

Business Problem

When Express Newspapers decided to move offices in 2003, the company decided that moving and/or upgrading their existing mainframe was not a viable option. The company needed to find a business solution to support its Pre-Press Control system, a critical application that must be available 24x7x365. Without it, Express Newspapers would be unable to get the news to its 3.4 million customers, and its printing presses would grind to a halt.

Business Solution

Express Newspapers selected migration specialist MSS International using Micro Focus' Lift and Shift™ solution to mainframe migration to port the existing applications to a commodity server using Micro Focus Studio and Server. The final result is that Express Newspapers has eliminated mainframe costs of £830,000, improved system performance and freed up IT staff to focus on other projects.

Overview

Express Newspapers is one of the publishing arms of Northern and Shell Media. The UK-based group's stable of publications includes the Daily and Sunday Express as well as the Daily Star and Daily Star Sunday.

Challenges

In 2003, Express Newspapers made the decision to relocate offices. With the move scheduled for 2004, the IT department had to decide which parts of the organisation's IT infrastructure would be transferred to the new location, and which parts would need to be replaced.

"The biggest decision that we had to make was related to the Pre-Press Control System," says Simon Cohen, Development Manager, Express Newspapers. "The Pre-Press Control system is a critical application that must be available 24x7x365. It looks after all our production needs, controlling the way in which the newspaper is produced and involves nightly critical deadlines. As a publisher, if the system isn't working, we can't get the news to the printers and therefore out to our 3.4 million readers. Clearly timing is everything. With no newspapers to sell, we would quickly be in a critical situation."

While the Pre-Press Control System resided on a mainframe, many of the databases that were also previously located on the mainframe system (e.g., pensions, payroll, advertising, circulation systems) had either already been outsourced or previously migrated to other platforms such as Sun Solaris or Microsoft Windows.

"This left us with a relatively small but extremely vital system on a large mainframe," added Cohen. "The mainframe was being leased at the time and was coming toward the end of the term of contract. We had to make the decision to continue with the lease, purchase a smaller Unisys mainframe or migrate to the Windows platform."

Solution

After an internal consultation between all senior members of the IT staff, Express Newspapers decided that it was expensive, undesirable and ultimately not feasible to conduct a full-scale replacement of the mainframe system. "There was no way we could realistically move the mainframe from the old building to the new one and so after reviewing all the options, we decided that a mainframe migration to Windows was the best option to go for", said Cohen.

After reviewing the options available, Express Newspapers selected MSS and Micro Focus to assist with the migration. "We'd had positive experience from working with Micro Focus in the past, particularly with our financial software" continues Cohen. "After reviewing the options available to us, we came to the conclusion that the reliability, cost and throughput from Micro Focus would serve our needs best. We were also very impressed with the MSS approach to this project and were confident that they could deliver on time."

As a result, Express Newspapers contracted MSS to conduct a Lift and Shift™ migration using Micro Focus Studio and Micro Focus Server. The application was migrated from proprietary Unisys hardware and software, COBOL74 and a hierarchical database system, to a 2 CPU HP Proliant ML570 G2 Server running Microsoft Windows with Microsoft SQL Server for data access, MSS technology as middleware and Micro Focus Studio and Server providing a high level of reuse of the existing COBOL business logic. "We were delighted by the fact that the Micro Focus software runs straight out of the box – it made the migration very simple," notes Cohen.

"Working with Micro Focus enabled the migration to run very smoothly," says Maurice Shnaps, CEO of MSS. "The process has enabled Express Newspapers to leverage existing business logic and transfer operations to a new platform quickly and safely. More importantly, the automated migration approach meant that Express Newspapers had to use very few internal resources to accomplish this task, which is a tremendous benefit."

Results

The migration was completed in 14 months, ensuring that the new system was up and running in time for the office move. In the meantime, because MSS were able to automate much of the migration process, normal operation and development within the IT department continued without interruption. "We really wanted to ensure that the new system was fully operational prior to the office move and both Micro Focus and MSS delivered on that target. We were very pleased with the timescales involved," says Cohen.

"This is really an impressive migration - the cost savings we have experienced since migrating off the mainframe have been exceptional," adds Cohen. "In the last full year of using the mainframe, we were paying £830,000 for leasing and maintenance." After an initial one-off cost upfront of just £43,000 for new hardware and software, the ongoing costs to Express Newspapers will be negligible on a year-to-year basis as all the other costs required to run the application are already covered by Express Newspapers' existing licences.

"We have gone from a mainframe costing hundreds of thousands of pounds and taking up a huge slice of space in a dedicated computer room, to potentially running the same system on a laptop from the comfort of your home. Even though the "it works so don't fix it" mentality is appropriate in a lot of cases, there does come a time when you need to move on. In Express Newspapers' case the cost savings were overwhelming and meant that the decision to migrate with MSS and Micro Focus really was a no-brainer," notes Cohen.

The migration has also helped to speed up the Pre-Press Control System. "The number of transactions the new system is processing has tripled in the last 18 months as editorial staff are now able to save page layouts much more frequently," says Cohen. "Previously, editorial staff would be reluctant to save pages of the newspaper as they pulled them together, as it would take around 20 seconds for this task to complete. This could cause issues with document control, meaning that staff would not always know which version of a saved story was the most up-to-date. As the speed of the system has increased, it now takes around a second to save work which has encouraged staff to save pages more regularly, ensuring that staff are able to track the latest versions of stories far more easily. In addition, staff can identify earlier versions of page layouts much more quickly, should they need to revisit them."

In addition, the new platform has ensured a greater availability of IT skills. "There are now only two skill sets in the office – UNIX and Windows," explains Cohen. "As we went for Windows, the whole process now runs on the Windows Server, ensuring that fewer staff are required to monitor and maintain the system. Previously, we had three staff members that were constantly working on the mainframe as they had a thorough understanding of the system. Now, all staff in the IT department are able to maintain the new system as they all have a good understanding of Windows. This means that any issues arising can be tackled by someone that has time available rather than having to pull a mainframe expert away from other tasks they are doing."

Also, as the new system is so modular, Express Newspapers can future-proof it for any additional performance requirements. "All we would need to do is plug in some 64-bit servers and we know that we would experience a significant increase in performance for a relatively small amount of money. This wouldn't have been feasible on the mainframe as it would cost tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of pounds," notes Cohen.

The Future

The next phase of the project is to modify the new system to accommodate integration with the next generation of front office desktop systems at Express Newspapers.

Furthermore, the migration to the new system has given Express Newspapers a new perspective on IT priorities and enabled the company to focus on other IT projects.

"With this migration, the longevity of the system has increased way beyond our expectations," continues Cohen. "We had originally anticipated that the new system would still need to be replaced after two years but we can certainly now keep this system running for quite a few more years, enabling us to free-up resources to concentrate on other IT projects and bring them forward."

"This project has also made us look at developing applications in-house again," concludes Cohen. "We had moved to a situation where we were using a lot of contractors to write new software for us, but this project has really given us the confidence to develop applications ourselves in the future with the assistance of companies like MSS and Micro Focus."