Datacentre

CONNECT REALISE THE BENEFITS OF SOFTCAT

Connect Solutions is part of Connect Distribution Services Ltd and is the UK's leading provider of business solutions for the domestic appliance and service industry. Over the past 40 years, Connect Solutions has developed mutually beneficial partnerships with key industry players (including major high street retailers and leading appliance manufacturers), helping these exploit new business opportunities with a range of services that take full advantage of the online marketplace, provide exceptional aftercare and customer support, and improve efficiency within their clients' existing operations.

The Connect group specialises in component and accessory distribution for White and Brown goods, but also offers a comprehensive range of small and major domestic appliances. In addition to distribution, the group also specialises in managing warranty and insurance repair contracts, utilising independent service providers all linked via web based software. Connect stocks around 120,000 stock lines, has over 16,000 active customers, distributes for over 100 original equipment manufacturers and a myriad of other support suppliers, and processes on average over 180,000 lines per month.

The Challenge

"We first encountered Softcat when we were looking for an organisation to provide managed IT support services for our internal networks and servers," explained Connect's Network Developer, Andrew Button. "They came highly recommended by Claranet, with whom we had already partnered."

Claranet's recommendation led to a partnership between Connect and Softcat that has grown over the years. The initial project of delivering support services for Connect's internal infrastructure overlapped with a second and far more important project. Connect was planning to relocate to a new site and needed a partner to oversee the entire process – including the design and implementation of the new corporate network. At the same time, Connect decided to take advantage of the move and replace/refresh its ageing hardware and software.

"We were faced with a number of issues," explained Andrew. "Our existing servers were of various ages and we were looking to expand our server farm and replace most of our existing servers with more powerful units."

Connect was also anxious to enhance its disaster recovery capabilities. Being so heavily reliant on IT across all aspects of its business, the group had identified that a large scale system failure could have a serious effect upon its day-to-day business. Two issues emerged: the need to ensure that all existing group business information was securely backed up and readily accessible, and that the time to restore services was minimal.

The Solution

"This was the most significant investment in hardware that the group had ever made," continued Andrew. "Although we had considerable IT expertise in-house, we recognised that we needed the specialist knowledge and experience that a company like Softcat could bring to the table, so we asked them to put together some recommendations."

At that time, and like many other organisations, Connect had a wide range of hardware that had been sourced over the years from a variety of manufacturers. One of the group's objectives was to standardise on a single vendor to simplify the management, maintenance and support of its infrastructure. "By standardising on a single vendor we knew that we could realise numerous benefits," continued Andrew. "The design, implementation and support of our new infrastructure would be far more streamlined and we would realise the economies of scale that such a policy would deliver – both in the purchase of our initial kit and in its ongoing maintenance and support."

Softcat recommended they standardise on HP hardware and set up a demonstration and proof of concept, including a solution based around VMware virtualisation technologies, at HP's Bracknell headquarters. Connect was already aware of the benefits that virtualisation could deliver but it was only after close consultation with Softcat that the full extent of the benefits were appreciated. "We knew that virtualisation would allow us to run several applications and operating systems on one physical server, which would let us create a more agile infrastructure, reduce the total cost of IT ownership and minimise downtime," explained Andrew. "Our objectives were to simplify processes and improve performance across our operation and with Softcat's advice and support we have achieved this by reducing the numbers and types of physical servers and being able to manage our infrastructure as a single entity."

Why Softcat?

"We were already having discussions internally about moving to a virtualised environment," continued Andrew, "and again it made sense to push forward with this concept at the same time as the relocation and hardware refresh. However, we simply didn't have the necessary levels of expertise internally and had asked Softcat to include virtualisation as a part of the overall project. We had the bones of the concept – Softcat put the meat on the bones."

Following thorough investigations and lengthy discussions, Connect adopted Softcat's recommendations to standardise on HP technology throughout including Blades, SAN and Tape Back Up. Working closely together, Connect and Softcat completed the final designs and successfully installed the new infrastructure in just 10 days.

"The entire process went extremely smoothly," commented Andrew. "Softcat was fantastic throughout the entire project. They built, installed and configured the hardware, installed and tested VMware and delivered on time and to budget. We only had one problem, and that was when one of the servers developed a fault. Softcat sorted out this issue and had a replacement server on-site within 24 hours."

During the install process, Softcat ensured that Connect's' IT specialists were brought up to speed with the new technologies. "Side-by-side with the install, Softcat's skills transfer programme helped our internal team to understand the capabilities of the new technologies," added Andrew. "This allowed us to really focus on the business benefits that our new infrastructure could provide and led us to completely rethink the ways in which our IT specialists could support the entire group."

Confidence breeds enthusiasm

With the new infrastructure up and running, Connect's IT department is now able to provide the group with far greater levels of service and support. "The entire solution now allows us to provision new servers extremely quickly – thanks to the new management tools and provide internal services that we simply couldn't consider previously, delivering immense benefits to the group," explained Andrew.

"Virtualisation has delivered numerous benefits," continued Andrew. "We can give our end users a virtual machine in half an hour, when it used to take us two to three weeks to spec out, order, and set up a physical one. We have saved each individual area time, money and resources, and have also been able to strengthen our disaster-avoidance and disaster-recovery plans, as well as reduce scheduled and unscheduled downtime."

The partnership between Connect and Softcat continues. Currently both organisations are evaluating the potential of VMware desktop virtualisation.

"This could be an extremely exciting project," concluded Andrew. "We are looking at the advantages and capabilities that desktop virtualisation could bring to the group. The advantages of partnering with Softcat have been numerous and have delivered very real benefits. Softcat are great," concluded Andrew. "You can always talk to someone who knows the technology, who understands the benefits and who can explain how those benefits will help Connect improve its services."

Key Facts

- Distribution Services business specialising in white and brown goods

- Over 40 year heritage

- £60m turnover

- 450 staff

- 120,000 stock lines and 16,000 active customers

Critical Success Factors

- Enable pain free move to the new site

- Protect business critical information

- Improve system resilience through secure back-up and rapid restore in the event of an outage

Highlights

- Server refresh using latest HP hardware technology

- Virtualisated server infrastructure using VMware

At a Glance

- Reduced physical footprint and associated savings in power, cooling and space

- Now possess a more agile infrastructure that can rapidly be altered and re-provisioned

- Vastly simplified management of overall environment

- Knowledge share and staged handover of new environment made sure Connect could take over day-to-day administration