



Benfield Motor Group Case Study

A storage overhaul has made Benfield Motor Group's data more secure and easier to manage, and also helped to drive up the performance and responsiveness of its entire IT function

When Martin Dale, group IT manager at Benfield Motor Group, joined the business in 2007, he was given the key to a datacentre that was "frightening" and not fit to support a growing business, with no data storage or disaster recovery strategy in place.

"It was a bomb site, with computers standing on top of each other and a mess of cables. There was nothing in terms of resilience and a single power supply," says Dale.

The family-owned business, with 24 dealerships across the UK, had reached the size where it was handling a lot of critical customer data, which was not being adequately protected.

Faced with the choice of either improving on what he had or starting from scratch, Dale decided to scrap the old kit and took the opportunity to deploy his ideal storage and business continuity solution.

"I could have rationalised and improved on what we had, but it is important to look at the bigger picture and at what you do as a company and see what technology is out there that can help you do things better. I investigated what could be done with storage and virtualisation technology," says Dale.

Working for a family-run business, Dale did not have a large budget, so he took advice from consultancy firm, Phoenix Software, on how to build an efficient and economical storage infrastructure.

"Phoenix recommended a virtual server environment with a NetApp storage platform to work with VMware technology. The analysis revealed what hardware we would need and the overall financials," says Dale.

Utilisation of many of the 18 servers was between five and 10 per cent and only two mission-critical applications were adequately protected in the event of a site disaster. →



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"Phoenix showed us how to consolidate down to two servers. I was sceptical but it really was a straightforward process," says Dale.

"It would have cost us £40,000 just to sort out the datacentre with rationalisation, but that would not have taken us forward. I thought there must be a better way to spend £40,000 and for an extra £100,000 we could achieve reliable storage, resilience, replication of data offsite, and a backup solution."

The proposal, which covered two sheets of paper, one consisting of a simple network diagram and the other outlining costs, was given the green light.

"Nobody wants a big pamphlet. By doing the preparation work and analysis, my proposal to the board was simple and direct and they listened," says Dale.

The migration process in 2008 took only two weeks.

"We spent a fair chunk on consultancy and planning, but money spent on understanding what needs to be done meant the process

could be executed at a rollercoaster speed and on a budget," says Dale.

Benfield now has a standardised NetApp storage system for production and disaster recovery which supports 700 users.

At Benfield's headquarters in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, storage resources are provided for more than 20 virtual machines running on just two VMware servers connected to the NetApp system via the iSCSI IP-based storage networking standard.

Software from NetApp enables automated data replication to a NetApp system supporting a third VMware server at a hosted disaster recovery site.

"The backup VMware server and another NetApp storage area network (SAN) means that data is replicated within minutes. We wanted offsite replication to do the job right by ensuring our disaster recovery capability," says Dale.

Aside from peace of mind over data protection, Dale highlights ease of use and time savings. Previously, the company did

not have the flexibility to take a half terabyte off one server and put it on another, and he estimates that the new storage infrastructure has cut administration time by half.

"It allows us to get on with our job and focus on being outward facing. We are not nurse-maiding servers, stuffing individual disks into servers or worried about reliability of disks. Our systems just run, and we can support users, not the infrastructure," he says.

"Now we can instantly provision new servers and storage, and we have improved the utilisation of both sets of assets."

Another benefit is that data backup is speedier since moving user fileshares and home directories off direct-attached storage to the NetApp infrastructure.

"Increased backup speed means we have better protection of user data," says Dale.

Preventing downtime is high on the list of the storage system's achievements as applying service packs and testing upgrade processes does not affect business operations. ➔





In just one scenario, Dale describes how BlackBerry users, some of whom are directors, were able to keep on using the devices despite a service pack failure.

"We installed a BlackBerry service pack but it failed and the BlackBerrys died.

The NetApp Snapshot technology protects data, however, as we can make a copy of the server before we start on a patch or upgrade. Without Snapshot, we would have had to rebuild the BlackBerry server from scratch, which would have taken the best part of a day. However, at the click of a button, we rolled back to the previous snapshot and 20 key users were able to continue using their BlackBerrys. The time saving is phenomenal and it adds another level of security," says Dale.

Time saving, efficiency and security of data were key drivers for the project, but having a green storage system is an added bonus.

"Going green was not a driver and I would struggle to justify a project solely on a green basis. I am not chasing figures on how much we are saving on electricity, but going from 18 servers to two and a SAN means the business makes energy savings on the back of the project," says Dale.

The storage investment means Benfield will save money in the future as de-duplication software means there is only one instance of any file. "Having only one copy of a file reduces storage waste. For example, previously it was possible for 700 users to each save a copy of the same file. If the NetApp de-duplication technology finds two copies of the same file, it will strip it down to just one copy. Saving space means we do not have to buy extra storage," says Dale.

The biggest benefit of storing data securely is allowing the business to do its job. "The IT team can devote its time to supporting users selling cars to customers. We are now a business enabler, not a necessary evil," Dale says.

The move also means that as Benfield expands, "IT does not get in the way," he says.

"When we acquire a site, having a reliable storage platform means that the business can focus on the new site selling cars. IT is not a distraction for them in getting on with the job."

NEXT STEPS

For further information on the products and services available from Phoenix Software, contact a member of our team on:

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