

GROWING SOLUTIONS

When plans for rapid global expansion were thwarted by a creaking IT system, iconic fashion brand Ben Sherman decided to upgrade. There was just one problem – space

Ben Sherman is a quintessentially British clothing brand with an international reputation and a supply chain that stretches across the globe. Like many companies, it was looking for a solution that would help it expand quickly and give its young designers the tools they required to deal with the fast-changing fashion industry. However, lots of problems stood in their way. The broad geographical spread of the company meant any solution had to be simple to use and easy to manage remotely. Ben Sherman was also limited by space – particularly in its retail premises, where every inch of retail floorspace matters. The solution the company chose fits these strict criteria, provides room for growth to three times its current size and manages tasks up to 20 times faster than before.

Ben Sherman's plans for further expansion – including the opening of new retail premises in prime retail spaces around the world and the extension of the range of stockists – were recently conceived. But before these could be realised, a rethink of the company's antiquated back-end IT infrastructure was essential. "Our old equipment was at the end of its life and ensuring it was delivering the right level of performance was getting expensive," explains Cormac McCarthy, Ben Sherman's IT Director. "We needed an increase in processing power and more storage capacity. I was also looking to make the job of managing the system easier."

McCarthy had a list of business needs that any new system would have to meet. One

key challenge would be enabling Ben Sherman to stay competitive in a cut-throat market where the time taken from design to on-the-shelf product is make or break.

"Since we last upgraded our infrastructure eight years ago, the dynamic of the workforce has changed," he explains. "We have a younger team now, particularly on the product design side, all well aware of what to expect from design technology. There's no more 'back of a fag packet' stuff, with designs being couriered from place to place or faxed around. Our designers now want digital storage and the ability to send designs online,

friendly to use technology rather than to rely so much on air, sea and road."

Another imperative for any new system is delivering cost savings. McCarthy is a firm believer that the role of an IT department is saving money for an organisation, not being a cost centre. "A company doesn't make money by selling, but by buying effectively," he says. "The more economies you can introduce into the buying process, the more margin you'll make. Then you hand the benefit onto your customers so they can make better margins. If you can reduce the time it takes to do one job, you can use that



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Stuart Macdonald, Managing Director, Seric Systems

which is, of course, more challenging to the IT team. It's our job to meet their expectations and give them a better service."

Without the right support from technology, McCarthy says, designs would not make it through to fruition quickly enough. "The use of technology to shorten lead times on product development is a key competitive issue nowadays," he explains. "And, let's face it, it's also much more environmentally

friendly to do another job. That way money is either saved or earned."

THE RIGHT KIND OF CHANGE

With an existing IT system not delivering fully on any of these counts, it was time to change. But any rethink had to work in Ben Sherman's business premises. One of the big issues with the old set-up was that any increase in the processing power and storage capacity meant a decrease in the amount of room in

premises where the physical space was often tight. "On some of our sites, space is at a premium and there is limited potential for further expansion," McCarthy says.

The options open to McCarthy were the traditional large standalone servers with external storage that eat power and need extensive cooling systems, or a simple blade server configuration that fits in a neat rack, needs much less cooling and uses less power. He says that the need for more processing power in less space as well as greater flexibility and easier management made the choice of system a "no-brainer".

"It had to be a blade server solution combined with a storage area network [SAN]," he says. "The ability to mix and match components and upgrade as appropriate is perfect for us since we are often looking to increase or reduce space according to changing needs."

McCarthy evaluated the blade marketplace and discovered plenty of choice. "Blades are becoming the industry norm," he says. "Although we've always been an IBM customer, we looked at a



VIEW FROM THE INDUSTRY



It is interesting to read the imperatives for the hardware upgrade. We hear more and more about the ecological benefits of blade systems, and they would, of course, apply here. But the main driver was more immediate – the need to reduce floor space, power and cooling costs. Such considerations are becoming ever-more important to all but the largest of data-centre blessed enterprises.

Neil Truby, Managing Director, Ardentia Ltd

number of options to see what they offered. We were inspired by many of the alternatives, but felt in the end that IBM had the edge. Their management software was probably the key to my decision and the system over all, both server and storage elements, seemed well planned and intuitive."

The job of installing and integrating the new system was given to IBM partner Seric Systems. It carried out a total overhaul of the IT in the company's Lurgan office in Northern Ireland, and in offices in London, installing in each an IBM BladeCenter, housing IBM HS21 blades, and the DS4700 Express storage system with a tape archiving solution attached. Software included the IBM Director Systems Management module, which helps with local and remote monitoring from a single admin console. After delivery in December 2006, the equipment was tested in January and February 2007 and went live in March.

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Cormac McCarthy, IT Director,
Ben Sherman

The roll-out process was free of major problems, says Stuart Macdonald, Managing Director of Seric. "The equipment fits together well as a compact and efficient solution," he says. "There aren't a million things to look at to get the system working exactly as you need. This means Ben Sherman's IT department can facilitate the needs of the business in a reduced timescale."

He highlights the benefits of the IBM Director management tool. "This allows the monitoring of hard drives remotely, offering predictive failure," he says. "Parts can be swapped out before they go wrong, minimising downtime. Ben Sherman is a 24/7 business, so it needs

maximum uptime. And they've got an expandable solution too, so they can grow their business easily."

As well as efficiencies gained in product development, McCarthy says that he hopes the new system will reduce overheads. "It's early days yet and we won't know the full degree of cost-savings from the new system for another 12 months or so, but I'm certainly expecting to save money on the system support side," he says. "We are already seeing less system downtime, which is something that we measure closely. There is also a distinct lack of support calls compared to what we had before."

But this is just the beginning, according to Seric's Macdonald. He expects that cost savings which were not specified on the original wish-list will become apparent in the future. "I predict that Ben Sherman will achieve savings on power consumption over time because the design of today's technology means you are spending less on power and also on air conditioning to keep systems cool," he says.

McCarthy is already happy with the efficiencies gained, most important of which is the ability to store, retrieve and use key data more effectively. "On the storage side, we now have different layers of data – faster or slower to access depending on their importance. Generally the more recent data is, the more accessible it is, until it gets put onto tape for archiving once past a certain age. This way, we can hold data on two seasons going forward, and three or four past seasons going back."

McCarthy estimates that Ben Sherman's data capacity needs have been doubling more or less year on year. He's counting on this present investment to avoid the need for thinking about plugging in any new capacity for two or three years. "It's my instinct to hold onto as much data as possible because you never know when you might need it," he says. "The SAN model facilitates and speeds things

VIEW FROM THE INDUSTRY



The Blade/SAN mix gives Ben Sherman processing power and flexibility in a compact package that is easy to run.

In addition, IBM Director provides cost-effective systems management to support 24/7 operations.

New capacity can be used up quickly when IT use was limited previously, but better tools must bring about better, faster results, which is what it's all about. As data requirements increase, Tivoli storage software will help you to manage the data and keep down costs.

*Francis Toye, Managing Director,
Unilink Systems*

up around here. Gone are the days when designers struggled to find the CD-Rom they had saved artwork on. Then it was fingers crossed the disk wasn't scratched and they could find the right file. With SAN, it's far more organised here."

As expected, the new system is helping the firm plan its expansion of retail premises. McCarthy says the old server set-up was specified to cope with no more than four or five shops, but can now easily manage three times that number. "This already makes life a lot easier at month ends and key reporting periods," he says. "It manages tasks between six and 20 times faster than the old system, I'm told. There are a lot of smiling faces in the retail team up and down the country. We have big plans for expanding our shop base around the world, which is where the new set-up will really pay off. We can twin the UK arrangement anywhere we need to."

NEXT STEPS: CONTACT

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