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Patrick Bichler
Head of Infrastructure
Corporate IT
SFS Group

SFS Group Moves Toward a Successful Future With a New Private Cloud Infrastructure From Hitachi Data Systems

The SFS Group, one of the world’s leading suppliers of mechanical fastening systems and precision formed parts, recognized that its infrastructure was reaching the end of its life cycle. When searching for a solution, the company decided to take the opportunity to update all aspects of its data center. It opted for a fully automated and integrated converged solution from Hitachi Data Systems, building a private cloud with Hitachi Unified Compute Platform for VMware vSphere.

About SFS Group
The SFS Group (http://www.sfs.biz) originates from the Stadler hardware store founded in Altstätten, Switzerland in 1928. Over the more than 80 years since then, the company has grown continuously. New technologies were successfully implemented, and from the 1970s, new production facilities and marketing organizations were continuously added, initially in European countries and then worldwide. SFS Group supplies various markets, especially those based on cold-forming core technologies. These include the automotive, construction, hardware, electrical, electronic and aircraft industries, as well as medical technology.

With its initial public offering in 2014, the SFS Group gained an even broader basis of support as an independent and autonomous company. In 2015, the company generated sales of about CHF 1.38 billion and employed a worldwide workforce of around 8,300 full-time employees.

The most important prerequisite for this success has always been SFS Group’s dedication to creating value for its customers. With the same level of dedication, the SFS Group also joined the Information Age, recognizing that a functioning IT department is the lifeblood of any company today. Integrating the entire system with all of its components to ensure high-performance processes throughout the company and allow IT to provide a valuable contribution to innovative solutions presented a particular challenge.

Benefits at a Glance
■ Total cost of ownership: approximately 20% reduction.
■ More effective, efficient business-process support.
■ Greater independence and flexibility.
■ Single management interface.
Challenge

The previous central storage infrastructure in the SFS Group reached the end of its life cycle. Following extensive market analysis, the company decided to take the major step of replacing all the components of its two data centers. They formed the heart of its innovative global IT architecture, supported 100% of business-critical applications, and provided 90% of all data storage capacity offered by the internal service provider, SFS services.

SFS Group’s commitment to the future is also reflected in its new state-of-the-art computer system implemented by HDS together with partners LANexpert and VMware.

Patrick Bichler, head of infrastructure in the corporate IT department of the SFS Group recalls, “We were faced with the decision of whether to retain the previous system architecture and replace individual systems incrementally, or to change the entire computer center’s structure.” For the company, this represented a unique opportunity to harmonize when the individual components were purchased and implement a comprehensive solution. This state-of-the-art solution offers maximum potential for the growth strategy of the company in terms of expandability. In this way, the SFS Group satisfied the necessary prerequisites for implementing a converged solution. According to Patrick Ackermann, business development manager at LANexpert, “In addition to the necessary harmonization of procurement cycles, it must be possible to integrate the workloads. Furthermore, it must be possible to adapt the business processes. All of this was present at SFS Group, which made it possible for us to prepare a tailored proposal.”

Patrick Bichler, at SFS Group, confirmed that the competition could not match the LANexpert proposal. “Their proposed solution satisfies 100% of our requirements and provides the best possible prospect for the future,” he explained. “Moreover, we liked the single-vendor approach, which met our expectations in terms of both implementation and support. The combination of technical competence, the technical solution and especially the software-based functionality, including the management interface, ultimately convinced us.”

Solution

Replace the Entire IT Infrastructure

SFS Group opted to look at not only the individual components, but also the entire package. The package included storage, network and server, and it extended all the way to the virtualization layer, backup infrastructure and archiving environment. The group named this ambitious project SFS PrivateCloud: next-Generation. Given its comprehensive nature, the project had a particularly challenging requirements catalog. Six solution providers accepted this challenge and submitted their concepts. The SFS Group decided in favor of the fully automated and integrated converged solution, based on Hitachi hardware and software as well as the server virtualization technology from VMware.

The design for this solution had been developed by Hitachi channel partner LANexpert, a system integrator for infrastructure solutions and services in the field of information and telecommunications technology (ICT). LANexpert had recognized that, for the most part, the SFS Group satisfied the necessary prerequisites for implementing a converged solution. According to Patrick Ackermann, business development manager at LANexpert, “In addition to the necessary harmonization of procurement cycles, it must be possible to integrate the workloads. Furthermore, it must be possible to adapt the business processes. All of this was present at SFS Group, which made it possible for us to prepare a tailored proposal.”

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Create More Efficient Processes With Innovative Approaches

Converged solutions integrate server, storage, network and the associated management software, eliminating the time-consuming integration of a wide variety of hardware components that is otherwise necessary. The converged solution proposed by LANexpert is based on the Hitachi Unified Compute Platform for VMware vSphere. This extremely flexible solution enables the rapid provisioning of data center options and highly efficient resource allocation for cloud environments. Resources as well as server, storage and network options can be loaded, provisioned, operated and monitored from one management portal with this fully automated solution. The new backup solution is based on Hitachi Data Protection Suite, powered by Commvault.

Implementation of the converged solution at SFS Group followed an ambitious schedule. In just three months after the project contract was signed, the first migrations of virtual systems and data storage occurred, thanks to the quality of the cooperative relationship among all solution participants. “Innovation means always finding new solutions and accepting challenges. We learned a great deal from one another,” summarized Patrick Bichler.

The SFS team also started the organizational changes in the spirit of cooperation by merging the storage and network team with the managers responsible for virtualization, server and backup environment. “We were able to combine the teams and name separate solution specialists for the complete converged solution even before the project started,” explained Urs Lüchinger, team leader for Core&Windows Infrastructure at SFS Group.

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In this way, the various administrators were not only involved in the project, but also sat at the same table. The era of ‘blindered thinking’ passed very quickly. What pleased me especially was that over the course of the project, typical network tasks could be performed by Microsoft® Windows® administrators and vice versa. For me, this was the confirmation that central management of this solution functioned properly and we were now really ‘converged,’” he explained. “Starting from summer 2015, we will no longer teach new trainees in the traditional manner, but rather use the ‘converged’ approach.” Pio Franco, the first converged system engineer in the SFS Group added, “The cooperation with Hitachi and LANexpert is fantastic. When there are problems, solutions are found and applied in a joint effort.”

Benefits

Greatly Reduced Time and Costs

The primary objective of the SFS Group in this project was to update its IT infrastructure, with the greatest possible view toward the future. But what does that mean in detail? And exactly how will the company benefit from this? The answer is best explained with the aid of an example. The internal ordering processes and the structure have changed significantly since the SFS Group started using the converged solution.

Previously, provisioning of new server capacities started an ordering process that took up to two days, since workflows involving several teams were needed. This included not only the technical provision, but also complete configuration of a server with the SFS software packages. Today, automating the processes makes it possible to handle orders with a self-service approach using a standard Service Catalog. Within a few minutes, a technician is now able to perform the configuration, and the fully configured server is available after two hours. “For our system engineers, this means more time for training and further education, and the ability to assume greater responsibility: classic job enrichment,” explained Patrick Bichler. These additional qualifications are important, since the combined Core&Windows Infrastructure team now has the responsibility for all layers (network, storage, server, virtualization and backup). To ensure that knowledge regarding operation of the solution is transferred effectively and established internally, importance was placed on incorporating the individuals responsible for operation into the decision and implementation processes. This approach paid for itself in the truest sense of the word. Overall, the SFS Group calculates that it has achieved a cost savings of about 20% for the internal and external users of this cloud infrastructure.

A Successful Outcome With a Strong Team

However, this project doesn’t just represent a future-oriented milestone for the SFS Group. This cooperation also represents something particularly special for Hitachi Data Systems, as Stefan Girschweiler, pre-sales consultant at Hitachi Data Systems emphasized, “For the first time, we were able, together with our partner LANexpert, to equip an entire computer center with Hitachi products, from storage and network to server and virtualization layer, the archiving solutions and the backup infrastructure. We are convinced that, based on the SFS model, this operating concept will benefit many of our customers in the coming years, as the strengths of the highly developed HDS products are used to their full potential.”

For Martin Schnider, country general manager at Hitachi Data Systems Switzerland, this represents a step in the right direction. “In this project, HDS was able to successfully take the step from strictly a product supplier of enterprise storage systems to a complete technology and solution provider for IT infrastructures. Cooperation with strong partners such as LANexpert is an important factor in this respect,” he explained.

And the customers benefit from this. Patrick Bichler is certainly convinced. He stated, “With this converged solution we have created an outstanding base for the future development of our private cloud. This was made possible by the tireless commitment of all project participants. This shows how important good and partner-like cooperation is.”