

Dixons Group Right-Sizing Their Servers

Case Study

Client Info at a Glance

Company: Dixons Group

Location: Headquartered in the UK



Company Overview: Dixons Group PLC is one of Europe's largest specialist retailers of consumer electronics and domestic appliances. It has more than 1,370 stores across the UK, the Republic of Ireland, the Nordic region, Spain, France, Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic. It specializes in the sale of high technology consumer electronics, personal computers, domestic appliances, photographic equipment, communication products and related services at and after the point of sale

With £4 billion per annum (over \$6 billion USD) in revenue, Dixons Group has become the UK's leading High Street retailer of consumer electronics, selling the largest range of TV, video, audio, personal computer, photographic and communications technology.

Dixons' IS Services Group manages and monitors applications for all 1100 Dixons stores in the UK. "We have a bit of everything in our data center," said Martyn MacDonald, production services manager for Dixons IS Services Group. From mainframe to UNIX, Windows NT and AS400 environments, the Dixons IS Services Group maintains well over 200 servers and a vast array of applications and data.

The Challenge

Sales during the winter holiday shopping season double for Dixon stores, creating twice as much work for warehouse systems in October and November. "During this peak season, we never really knew where our 'pressure points' were," said MacDonald.

"We wanted to put a professional tool in so we would have a good view of our applications. We started with the applications running on Solaris, looked at about five [performance] vendors, and cut a short list of three."

In 2000, Dixons began directing all applications to a Solaris server environment. In time the capacity went from having two or three applications on a server to twenty. "It's crept up on us," says MacDonald. "We realized we didn't know for sure what was using how much, and we weren't doing any 'real' performance monitoring or capacity planning."

After reviewing other vendors, Dixons made several discoveries. “One didn’t do much for us beyond what we were already doing,” said MacDonald. Dixons also ran into companies offering expensive solutions that “wanted to charge heavily and spend 20 days installing in each environment — and charge us for that too,” he said.

After three months of vendor evaluations, Dixons chose a combination of TeamQuest® View and TeamQuest Model for their Solaris environment. “It was moderately priced and fit our needs.”

The Solution

The installation process “was a brilliant, outstanding feature,” said MacDonald. TeamQuest Performance Software was installed and working on several testing environments and training was done within two days. “We rolled it out from there remarkably quickly,” he continued. “Within two weeks we had [TeamQuest software] on all the production domains and even some of the testing domains, as well. We had output everywhere, including all the test domains, development domains and Web servers.”

During the holiday shopping season, the IS Group now uses TeamQuest Performance Software to analyze increased workload numbers generated in the merchandise warehouses. The company is also modeling new workloads for testing environments over a four hour period, scaled to ten times the number users to determine what actual sizing would occur during deployment.

Once operating, the group was able to see all of the domains were mis-sized. “Most of them were oversized,” said MacDonald. “We had one database domain with 11 CPUs and another with 8. The correct size for both is about 3. Given the costs of the hardware and database costs, that alone has saved us a half million pounds.

The Benefits

Contrary to the over-provisioning, Dixons IS Group did find some domains nearly at capacity. Even so, “the preponderance was that we had oversized everything, and we’re aware now of an excess of a half million pounds of unused assets we already have.”

One surprise was the excellent quality of the graphs available from TeamQuest View. “You can print out a graph and see the whole story over whatever time period you choose,” said MacDonald. Sarah Knowles, capacity planner for Dixons, looks at graphs available in TeamQuest View on a weekly basis. She has identified a number of performance issues before they became critical support problems.

“Looping processes that suddenly take up 25 percent of the domain can stay on the system for four or five days. You get many of those and the system will be crashing. She’s spotting those before they become serious issues,” he continued.

With the results generated from Solaris, including the capital savings, MacDonald received approval from his directors to purchase TeamQuest Performance Software for the Dixons Windows NT environment. “NT was in a similar state [as the Solaris environment], but worse.” Instead of 20 servers to monitor, there were 160-170 systems.

Martyn MacDonald and his team know that companies looking for performance management and capacity planning solutions need to make quick decisions when it comes to IT performance solutions. According to MacDonald, “TeamQuest will do a good job. There are all sorts of problems buried that you don’t understand. TeamQuest allows you to see both sides of the equation and lets you sort them out.”

After explaining to his directors the value-add of TeamQuest products, including mention of the half-million pound hardware savings, selling the idea of TeamQuest Performance Software for NT became particularly easy. “The first purchase I had to fight for; the second one was a five minute discussion.”

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