

A Virtualised Environment for Chard Robinson



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Paul Holmes
IT Manager
Chard Robinson Group



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Chard Robinson Group started life in 1996 when directors Stephen Chard and Neil Robinson pooled resources in response to poor service levels that they had experienced in the property arena. Their aim was to provide a complete property solution for clients with one clear focus: customer care.

Today, Chard Robinson Group is a multi-million pound property group with interests in both the UK and abroad. The group encompasses a broad range of disciplines, continuously investing in both its portfolio and staff to create a successful business platform and an enjoyable working environment.

The Challenge

Chard Robinson is pursuing an aggressive growth drive to move from 8,000 property managed units to 30,000 within 3 years – a process that will be achieved through acquisition and business development.

When Paul Holmes joined as IT Manager, the decision was taken to consolidate the existing IT infrastructure into a virtualised environment. “We have a very small internal IT department and for such a strategic project I needed external advice and support from an organisation that I trusted,” explained Paul Holmes.

“Virtualisation was clearly the way forward for Chard Robinson; it would give us the flexibility we required to support future growth, streamline infrastructure management so that our IT specialists

could focus on strategic projects, provide ‘always available’ services, simplify new application roll-out and deliver improved resilience and security.”

Although relatively new to his position with Chard Robinson, Paul was familiar with the levels of expertise and in-depth technical knowledge that EACS could deliver, having previously worked with EACS over a 9 year period whilst at other major organisations.

“We have a great deal of experience in server consolidation and virtualisation,” explained EACS’ Managing Director, Mike Dearlove. “Server sprawl is a common issue found in many businesses today, caused by the tendency to install applications on separate physical machines in order to avoid conflict, leading to a relatively low level of average CPU utilisation. This, combined with Chard Robinson’s acquisitions, increased the number of users and demand on the existing IT infrastructure. Virtualisation was the elegant and cost effective solution that would resolve Chard Robinson’s immediate issues and provide the platform for future growth.”

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“My previous relationship with EACS and their willingness to work alongside Chard Robinson and undertake knowledge transfers so that we could continue development independently, were major factors in our decision to partner with them,” continued Paul Holmes. “EACS had proven themselves to be a resource that I could trust and this, combined with the fact that they were local to us made EACS our partner of choice.”

In addition to implementing an agile virtualised environment, Chard Robinson also required a far more resilient disaster recovery solution with data replication at a secondary site so that the business could continue in the event of a serious system failure.

The Solution

Working closely with Paul Holmes and other stakeholders at Chard Robinson, EACS consultants undertook a review of the existing IT infrastructure and put forward detailed proposals to address Chard Robinson’s existing and future objectives as a three year strategy, with the company goals in mind. The proposals centred on virtual servers to deliver an improved level of agility, a mirrored SAN architecture to provide resilience, and a standardised platform to enable the rapid adoption of newly acquired companies into the Chard Robinson family.

Increasing agility and high availability

To deliver an agile and highly available environment, EACS implemented Citrix XenApp with its unique Citrix HDX technology to leverage application and session virtualisation and ensure optimal user experience irrespective of user device, network, and location.

Citrix Xen technology allowed Chard Robinson to manage all applications from one central location, increasing the utilisation of IT resources, reducing complexity and simplifying the process of delivering applications.

“Getting the correct groundwork in place from the outset was extremely important to ensure that Chard Robinson’s total cost of ownership was kept low over the projected five year solution life,” explained Mike Dearlove.

Server performance and management was further enhanced via XenServer which optimised the location of server workloads to improve performance and utilisation while increasing server readiness within resource pools. “As well as ensuring that application requirements and expected performance levels are always met, XenServer also allowed Chard Robinson to accelerate the provisioning of additional application servers into production,” continued Mike Dearlove.

XenServer also reduced the impact of failures and protected Chard Robinson against disasters, creating an always available virtual infrastructure. A further benefit was that Chard Robinson could undertake server and application upgrades during normal business hours, reducing the impact on user productivity, saving money, and giving Chard Robinson’s IT staff their nights and weekends back.

A more efficient disaster recovery solution

EACS augmented Chard Robinson’s existing hardware with two additional servers to provide three virtual hosts which ran the virtual machines and provided sufficient capacity to failover should any aspects fail.

With all the data held centrally Chard Robinson’s virtual machines could be moved between hosts providing high availability and fault tolerance, with the additional advantage of allowing servers to be taken down for maintenance without any effect on users.

Centralising applications and data in Chard Robinson’s datacentre ensured that virtual application delivery and management was secure by design. Encrypted connectivity, advanced access control, policy-based password management, and session monitoring provided additional layers of protection for Chard Robinson’s intellectual property and corporate assets.

“Data was further protected by local snapshots, allowing individual snapshots of the data to be taken during the day,” continued Mike Dearlove. “Should corruption or deletion occur, these snapshots would allow Chard Robinson to ‘rollback’ with ease. This data could then be replicated either to another geographically separated SAN, or backed up to a secure data centre offsite.”

EACS resolved Chard Robinson’s storage issues with NetApp Production SAN (SAS) and a 1.5 TB NetApp DR SAN (SATA). In addition to providing real methods of testing the Disaster Recovery capabilities without impacting the protection that has been deployed, the protection delivered by the high availability features of the NetApp system could be expanded to provide effective replication to remote systems and ensure an effective Disaster Recovery solution which offered business continuity.

“We are now well positioned to accommodate future growth. EACS fully understood our unique requirements and put together a cost-effective solution that would achieve both our immediate and long term objectives.”

Paul Holmes
IT Manager
Chard Robinson Group



Standardisation for growth

Virtualisation enables data-centres to be adapted to meet constantly evolving IT requirements. XenServer creates a virtual infrastructure that integrates seamlessly with existing storage environments, decreasing the amount of time it takes for IT to respond to user needs and allowing the provisioning of new servers and IT services within minutes.

By virtualising Citrix XenApp with XenServer, Chard Robinson benefited from a number of advantages, including live migration, physical server to virtual machine (P2V) conversions and virtual-to-virtual (V2V) conversions, shared storage driver integration, centralised management, Active Directory integrated security, VM template functionality and infrastructure update management.

XenApp also reduced Chard Robinson's cost of desktop management by up to 50 percent by simplifying the management and delivery of all Windows applications. Centralising applications in the data-centre further reduced costs and increased efficiency by enabling IT to manage a single instance of each application in an application hub, rather than using manual processes to install applications on every PC. Applications are then delivered via application streaming directly to Windows PCs for offline use or run on high-powered servers in the data-centre for online use on any device or operating system.

“Consolidation of the existing servers was key to reducing Chard Robinson's overall management burden and power

consumption as well as providing a scalable, flexible and resilient platform into the future,” explained Mike Dearlove. “When consolidating any IT, bottlenecks can appear and when a single Virtual Host is running multiple servers accessing a resilient and scalable storage solution becomes paramount.”

The highly resilient enterprise class solution provided inherent stability to address Chard Robinson's aggressive growth plans. Should more capacity be required, upgrades of either additional disk trays to increase storage capacity, or the addition of another server to increase the resource pool could be achieved rapidly and at relatively low cost.

An exemplary partner

Working in close partnership with Chard Robinson, EACS procured, installed and implemented the new virtualised solution, including ongoing support to ensure that Paul Holmes would be able to maintain and manage the new solution efficiently and effectively.

“EACS has continued to be the exemplary partner,” commented Paul Holmes. “With our new virtualised environment we have now achieved over 99.9% uptime and have the flexibility that we needed to support our future growth. My trust in EACS has been well proven.”



Benefits:

- Virtual servers deliver up to 40% savings on power consumption and 60% less airflow than conventional rack-mounted servers
- Aging and unreliable infrastructure replaced with a solution that provides flexibility for future growth and delivers 99.9% uptime
- Reduced travel and access to applications and data from remote locations lowers the carbon footprint and enhances employee lifestyle
- Partnership with independent virtualisation experts ensures best-of-breed technologies tailored to unique organisational requirements
- Virtualisation project implemented on time, to budget and in line with strategic objectives
- Disaster Recovery capabilities allow for continuation of business and safeguard of data in the event of a serious system failure
- Phased programme ensured roll-out of solution as easily managed processes
- Close cooperation between EACS and Chard Robinson provides knowledge sharing and transfer
- Entire project, including infrastructure design services, IT supply, onsite resource, emergency break fix and support services managed by EACS, giving a single point of contact and ensuring smooth progression across all phases

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