

Technology to help London Train Network keep on track



London Overground Rail Operations Ltd (LOROL) is a joint venture company between MTR Corporation of Hong Kong and Chiltern Railway's parent company, John Laing Rail.

Both MTR and Chiltern have a reputation for delivering top quality customer service, a reputation which is guarded jealously and which has been enhanced by the successful launch of London Overground. MTR operates a world class, high volume commuter railway which achieves punctuality of over 99% using a modern EMU fleet technically similar and of similar age profile to those in the UK. Laing Rail has doubled passenger numbers on its Chiltern franchise, and has consistently had the best overall customer satisfaction scores of any London commuter network.

The railway benefits from a multi-million pound investment from the Mayor of London and Transport for London, and MTR Laing is committed to achieving a step change in passengers' experience, including punctuality, security, quality of trains and stations, and customer service.

When MTR and John Laing Rail won the prestigious franchise to run the London Overground train network for Transport for London (LOROL), an IT infrastructure was required which would meet the highest standards of performance, resilience and security.

With a serious set of responsibilities for safety, punctuality and customer service, LOROL wanted an IT system which would provide robust and resilient support for daily operations and give good return on investment over the medium to long term.

It was also vital that the system should be rapidly and seamlessly scalable to meet future expansion plans. The organisation was scheduled to begin

operations with around 250 staff, but it was clear that numbers would increase rapidly as operations developed. Responsibilities associated with the 2012 Olympic Games in London could be just part of growth plans for the future.

The new IT system had to be designed, commissioned, implemented and tested within a timescale of only a few months. Working with EACS, a series of planning meetings was held to review options in IT infrastructure and to chart the way forward.

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Key objectives

Gareth Murphy was keen to focus on key objectives of excellence in performance, security and business continuity.

“It was clear that top standards of data storage, backup and restore would be essential to meet LOROL’s objectives,” explains Mike Dearlove, Managing Director, EACS.

“Because space would be at a premium in the early stages of LOROL’s operations, we also discussed how virtualisation technology would help and how this should be approached.”

“In all the plans, scalability had to be considered, along with availability and resilience.”

The EACS Infrastructure team began the search for solutions, looking broadly at the best possible mix of technologies to recommend to LOROL.

The way forward

After a careful review of the options, LOROL managers decided on the shape of the new IT system and the technologies in which they would invest. This included HP Blade Servers, Microsoft software, Citrix, NetApp technology for data storage and backup, plus VMware for virtualisation.

“They are all market leaders in their respective fields – the best of breed, but together deliver real synergy,” said Mike Dearlove. “We knew that they would work well, minimising risk, offering the highest degree of availability and providing a secure platform from which to move forward in the future.”

NetApp storage technology

“In the storage arena we believe NetApp provides the most scalable, flexible, robust and integrated storage solution available today,” said Mike Dearlove.

“Because the plan was to run SQL applications and Microsoft Exchange, the application-aware snapshotting from NetApp offered significant benefits and was the obvious preferred choice.”

Gareth Murphy and other LOROL managers attended a NetApp demonstration where they were able to see how the recommended solutions would work in practice.

“Gareth had experience of other major storage vendors and was very impressed by the ease of management of NetApp technology in comparison,” recalls Mike Dearlove.

“We have successfully deployed NetApp solutions across many industries before and were confident that it was the correct solution. Other vendors can address parts of the solution spectrum that NetApp offers, but no other vendor can offer such a comprehensive product range that can grow to match your needs in terms of scale or functionality without requiring that you jettison your original investment in hardware or skills.”

VMware for virtualisation

The choice of VMware for virtualisation was another key element in the LOROL solution. The LOROL business was first set up in a comparatively limited physical environment in Marylebone Station and the initial IT system constructed using virtualisation was a key element in the success of the project.

Virtual servers and virtual desktops allow multiple operating systems and multiple applications to be hosted locally and in remote locations, freeing users from physical and geographical limitations.

“LOROL then moved to new and more spacious premises,” explains Mike Dearlove. “We were able to move the virtual environment which we had set up across to the new offices.”

Business benefits for LOROL and passengers

Following a rapid implementation of the new LOROL IT infrastructure by EACS technical teams, the system has been working successfully to support the massive daily operations of the London overground railways, underpinning safe and punctual services for passengers.

“EACS has helped us to implement this system with the highest level of service and support and continue to do so,” says Gareth Murphy, Head of IT at LOROL.

“It all went smoothly,” concludes Mike Dearlove. “Gareth Murphy and his team identified the priorities and we worked through them to deliver the system. In this kind of customer-focused transport industry, success is very visible! The system had to work well and it had to work first time.”

Preferred Partner



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