

Mercator Verzekeringen

A flexible storage network as a cost-effective way of tackling the never-ending growth in data requirements

“OUR STORAGE NETWORK HAS TO LET US GO IN ANY DIRECTION WE WANT. THIS IS WHY WE DECIDED TO BASE IT ON THE VERSATILE CISCO MDS DIRECTORS. NOW THAT THE NETWORKING AND STORAGE MARKETS ARE CONVERGING, STORAGE TECHNOLOGY FROM THE MARKET LEADER IN NETWORKING IS UNDOUBTEDLY AN INVESTMENT WITH GOOD LONG-TERM PROSPECTS.”

Koen van Dyck, head of the ICT Business Systems Services department at Mercator

Mercator Verzekeringen provides a broad range of insurance solutions for individuals and small to medium-sized businesses through a network of independent intermediaries. An insurer who is just as much at home with life insurance as with damage insurance. Mercator is part of the Swiss Baloise Group, but it is oriented entirely towards its home market in Flanders.

LABOUR-INTENSIVE AND EXPENSIVE LEGACY

"Until recently, Mercator had a very fragmented storage infrastructure, on the one hand because of the way it had evolved, and on the other because direct attached storage (DAS) had mostly been used in the past. The majority of the business systems were not only connected to their own storage systems, but they also used different backup solutions. That resulted in labour-intensive storage management with quite a bit of unnecessary work and too much unused storage capacity," says Koen van Dyck, head of the ICT Business Systems Services department at Mercator, who outlined the old situation.

Because Mercator Verzekeringen is supporting more and more services electronically and is also regularly expanding the range, the storage requirements are growing and shifting continuously. That sometimes made storage management difficult for the IT team.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- BACKGROUND**

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- CHALLENGE**

The storage system that Mercator Verzekeringen inherited from the past was highly fragmented with various different backup solutions, making storage management awkward and expensive. Since the company is supporting more and more services electronically, the storage requirements are also growing and changing continuously.
- SOLUTION**

Mercator Verzekeringen installed a storage network that connects over twenty servers with a fully redundant storage system and a central backup solution. Two Cisco Modular Data Storage Directors form the hub of the storage network that links the systems together.
- RESULTS**

As a result of this centralisation, data storage and security run much more smoothly and cheaply. This not only makes it easier for Mercator's IT staff to guarantee that the existing applications will work properly, but also lets them start up new business applications more quickly. Furthermore, thanks to the power and versatility of the Cisco equipment, the storage network will be sufficient for quite some time yet. Mercator can connect extra systems, bridge distances and integrate new technology.

"We use our storage environment for the central applications that support our banking and insurance activities. Our branch offices and our representatives use it too. At the moment we are installing a new front office package for Mercator Verzekeringen at all our agents. Before too long, there will be about a thousand users working with it from different locations. The data for these sorts of critical applications must always be available, and so the

security has to be excellent. And applications like these need large amounts of storage too. In a fragmented storage environment, it can't always be taken for granted that the storage required will be available, or that the applications will be safeguarded against system crashes and data loss," explains Koen van Dyck.



Furthermore, more and more of these types of applications are being added and the IT team has to be able to support these new projects. "The pressure to deliver flexible storage capacity for new applications is increasing. For example, we are working on a data warehouse, but it's difficult to work out the storage capacity needed for that in advance. For our IT team to be able to continue to guarantee high-quality and cost-effective support for the staff, we needed a central storage system that could easily be modified and expanded. Of course, the security for centralised data has to be especially good. This meant speed, reliability and scalability were the most important requirements," says Koen van Dyck.

CENTRALISATION SIMPLIFIES SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

Mercator Verzekeringen decided to centralise its storage systems in a storage network. It connects over twenty servers up to two HP storage systems and a central backup solution that first stores the data on disk and then archives it to tape. At the centre of the network are two Cisco Modular Data Storage Directors (Cisco MDS 9509 and Cisco MDS 9216). These form the hub that from now on will connect the servers to the storage and backup systems. Koen Van Dyck: "Changes to one of the storage systems are automatically passed on to the other machine. If one of

them crashes, the staff can keep on working. Also, you don't need to shut down systems for maintenance and modifications, and on top of that our backup is much more efficient now and completely integrated into the network. It's not a task that the servers have to perform any longer. And if something goes wrong, we can restore the data, and it has little or no effect on the user."

MORE TIME AND SPACE FOR NEW PROJECTS

This solution provides a guarantee for the staff that the applications will be fully available and high speed. For Mercator's IT team, storage management is now much more straightforward. "We don't need to provide so much unused disk space in order to keep everything running, which saves on costs. And it's much easier for us to provide more storage space for users who request it. It also means we can start up new projects more rapidly. Previously, if we had to expand a system, that always meant downtime and often a waiting period until all the equipment arrived," states Koen van Dyck.

The storage network allows Mercator to keep the storage costs under control with the same number of IT staff, while at the same time providing a high-quality service for the personnel. "We now have an excellent basic infrastructure to keep on doing this in the future too. That long-term perspective was an important reason for having the Cisco MDS at the core of the storage network. It is a very flexible device based of reliable and progressive technology that we can use to extend our business continuity further. We also intend to open a second data centre at another site, so that we can introduce a physical separation into the redundancy of our storage infrastructure. We can use our existing Cisco MDS machines for that, since they can bridge the distances without the throughput being affected," according to Koen van Dyck.

FUTURE INTEGRATION GUARANTEED

The potential for growth with the Cisco MDS is not only in terms of the number of connected systems and the distances that these connections have to run across. "Because the Cisco MDS supports lots of network protocols, you can integrate pretty much everything that comes onto the market into the existing storage network. Even though there's always a little uncertainty about how your storage systems are going to evolve, you are sure of your return on investment. The Cisco MDS allows you to set up lots of different types of connections, based on current protocols and new ones such as iSCSI. Different sorts of systems are able to communicate in various ways, both over short and long distances," says Koen van Dyck.



Furthermore, the Cisco storage products work in the same way as the classic networking systems. Given that Mercator is very familiar with the latter, systems management for the storage network is fairly simple for the IT team. Koen Van Dyck: "We have come across the same advanced functions in the Cisco storage products as in their classic networking technology –such as virtual SAN and Quality of Service. The first of these allows you to split a storage network up into various virtual sub-networks. That lets you add extra security to the storage traffic, which isn't a bad idea since everyone is now storing data on the same system. Using a virtual SAN makes it easier for you to guarantee that users only have access to data that concerns them. Quality of Service allows you to label your storage traffic and use it as a basis for prioritising certain data flows. That lets you tune the performance of the storage network precisely to the widely varying needs of the various applications. The data exchange for the database of a front-office application is, after all, more important than for a server that just contains documentation."

Storage networks and ordinary computer networks are also converging more and more, which Koen van Dyck sees as yet another reason for choosing Cisco technology: "Given the market share and the expertise that Cisco has in the classic networking market, we are convinced that Cisco is also going to become an important player in the storage market. Storage products are not just a side-line for Cisco. A prime example of that is the iSCSI protocol. Cisco was the first to support that in its storage products. If you have a network structure that supports iSCSI, you can link servers to the storage systems without having to put special network cards in each server. The technology was absolutely new when we were expanding our storage infrastructure. We aren't using it yet, but we're following its evolution with great interest. It's another path that is open for us with the Cisco MDS."

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