

Groupe Agricola Rises to Challenge of Data Centre Virtualisation



Groupe Agricola

HQ : Paris

Number of employees : 850

Project Name: Nexus Project

Project Manager : Julien Mousqueton, System and Network Architect

Servers : 200 virtual servers, 20 ESX hosts (physical servers)

Percent virtualized : 99%

Result : 50% Reduction in physical DMZ servers after implementing Nexus 1000V and vSphere Enterprise Plus.

Groupe Agricola, the French insurance conglomerate, has deployed Cisco® Nexus 1000V and 5000 Series Switches to virtualise its infrastructure, and this change has been met with high business user satisfaction.

Virtualising the data centre with VMware brings many benefits, but it also brings new challenges involving how organizations design and manage their network and security teams. If not properly configured virtualisation can place strains on the network, even if server administrators see gains in server capacity optimisation. In the case of Groupe Agricola, the deployment of a suite of Cisco Nexus virtual switches, combined with VMware vSphere management tools, facilitated cooperation between server and networking teams and resolved challenges arising from this infrastructure consolidation project. Groupe Agricola manages retirement, injury, health care, and savings plans for employees in the agricultural sector. When the group decided to consolidate the IT infrastructure three years ago, VMware, the market leader, was the natural choice. Today 99 percent of the group's servers, critical and noncritical, are virtualised on the VMware vSphere platform. Two hundred virtual machines (200 VM servers running on 20 ESX version 4) support applications including Oracle, Business Objects, or Lotus Domino. But for the network engineers, the server infrastructure was just so many undifferentiated black boxes.

Roles and Responsibility Challenge, Not Technical Challenge

In a classical data centre, when a physical server is installed it is connected to a known physical port on a switch, and the network administrator configures the appropriate policies: VLAN membership, traffic shaping, I/O filtering, network addresses, etc. In a virtualised data centre, everything changes. Network switches cannot be configured with individual policies for each virtual machine; network administrators can only see to the underlying physical platform, the server. Also, for all the benefits that vMotion brings to the data centre, it complicates the job of the network engineer as applications migrate across physical ports. Server virtualisation is a serious challenge for the network administrator. According to Julien Mousqueton, network designer with Groupe Agricola, "It was worse than that. Certain network parameters were being configured on the server by system administrators, and were no longer under the control of the networking team." In designing Groupe Agricola's new virtualised data centre, the principal challenge was an operational and people challenge. Several cross-functional meetings were needed to define the roles and authority of each team, and to demonstrate the advantages of a new virtualised architecture. The time spent proved to be essential to the success of the project.



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