



Pro Drive Star Energy case study

Pro Drive's virtual vision revitalises Star Energy

A close relationship with Pro Drive and a progressive approach to new technology have played an important role in Star Energy's success story. Most recently, migration to a virtual server infrastructure has increased network resilience, uptime and speed for the company's mission-critical accounting and gas storage operations.

Upgrades and replacements, including Windows Server 2008 and Exchange 2007, have delivered a strong and flexible network that supports business growth and provides a cost-effective platform for future expansion.

Star Energy, a wholly owned subsidiary of PETRONAS, is the UK's second largest onshore oil producer and one of the main developers of underground gas storage using depleted oil and gas reservoirs.

Founded in 1999, Star Energy employs over 180 people and has a turnover in excess of £70 million.

A decade of development

Pro Drive has built a close relationship with Star Energy, beginning in 2000 when it had just 35 employees, and over the years has developed a comprehensive and flexible IT strategy to grow with the business.

Having installed the original network for Star Energy's London head office and Hampshire operations, Pro Drive has gone on to complete a succession of projects during the past decade, including linking multiple locations

into a single wide area network and restructuring the company's email system, along with remote access for employees on the move.

"Our accounting operations and commercial control systems for gas storage are central to the business," says Steve Pawson, Group Finance Manager at Star Energy. "There's a strong dependence on network reliability between company sites across the UK and that underpins our IT strategy."

“System uptime has drastically increased. Previously our email might have gone down for a while but since the upgrade we’ve had no occurrences, and if any issue does arise it goes unnoticed because of the backup that’s in place.”

Embracing technology

When working with Pro Drive on specific problems, Star Energy’s approach is to consider new technology options and, where possible, implement system upgrades that not only resolve the original issue but also provide improvements in overall performance.

“We like to keep pace with technology and have completed three major upgrades now,” explains Pawson.

“The latest network development, probably the most significant we’ve undertaken, centres on migration to a new virtual server infrastructure.”

Knowing Star Energy’s open approach to new technologies, Pro Drive highlighted issues with existing servers as an opportunity to implement a virtualization solution.

“Our servers and hardware were becoming outdated and the accounts system in particular, and other related applications, were suffering most in terms of downtime,” says Pawson.

“With rapid business growth, we needed something more robust, especially at month-end for processing accounts when more people are reliant on system access.”

Accepting Pro Drive’s project proposal, in 2009 the network was largely migrated to a virtual server infrastructure based on Citrix XenServer.

File servers were replaced and upgraded to Windows Server 2008; application servers were upgraded and mail servers were replaced, upgraded to Exchange 2007 and replicated to a hosted offsite location to provide disaster recovery (DR) facilities.

In fact Star Energy’s head office move > in August 2009, including relocation of its main data centre, was accomplished with very little interruption to staff thanks to use of the DR systems.



Reenergised performance

As well as reducing physical server count and lowering the cost of future expansions, Pawson says that the virtual infrastructure has delivered major performance improvements. "System uptime has drastically increased.

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Pro Drive has significantly increased live system resiliency and applications performance, but even in the event of a mail or accounts system failure, recovery time has been reduced from 2-3 days to just 2 hours.

Mission-critical systems are maintained through a sophisticated database failover system and dedicated backup servers have been installed at all main sites.

Several new server systems have been delivered at 50% of the normal costs, through the savings generated by not having to purchase server hardware, combined with the decreased deployment times on the virtual server infrastructure.

Pro Drive has also ensured that Star Energy's vital link to National Grid Gas, operator of the UK's gas distribution network, runs with maximum reliability.

Pawson says: "Network strength is a major benefit for our gas storage operations, which are continually subject to 'nominations' regarding the injection and withdrawal schedule for gas reserves.

Control decisions are based on market supply and demand so the ability to access data quickly and reliably has huge commercial implications."

Speed is another notable improvement across the network, including remote sites, and Pro Drive is currently working on a project to upgrade lines which will reap further enhancements.

Other projects in the pipeline include a company-wide roll out of Microsoft Office 2010, and a review of network security.

A proactive relationship

The virtualisation project has created a strong, flexible network that helps Star Energy work more productively and securely.

"Pro Drive have been very good to work with and they're always proactive in evaluating what's on the market," says Pawson.

"They sit on our IT steering committee and bring forward new ideas as well as reporting on performance and day-to-day support issues."

Pro Drive appreciates that finely tuned systems are only half the story: happy IT users are key to any system's success.

Working closely with Star Energy means dealing on a daily basis with its employees and user support is provided round-the-clock by experienced engineers.

"Pro Drive has the trust of our staff," says Roland Wessel, CEO of Star Energy, "and that's number one when you're dealing with people. I'd rate it higher than technical expertise."

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