

Kneedler-Fauchere Turns to ABC Services for a High-Style IT Infrastructure

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Problem:

- no dedicated backup system
- no quoting or invoicing system
- funneling the Internet through a centralized location using a T1 line

Solution:

- replacing the infrastructure
- set up a cloud-based backup and recovery service



Kneedler-Fauchere Group (KFG) is the iconic designer destination for new and legendary collections of luxury fabric, furniture, wallpaper, and accessories. In business for more than six decades, the company employs approximately 80 people and serves customers in eight states. KFG is divided into three primary business units: Gregorius-Pineo which designs and manufactures luxury furniture in Los Angeles; Kneedler-Fauchere Imports, the import/export of textiles, fabrics and accessories, which is how the business got started; and Kneedler-Fauchere, its multi-supplier designer showrooms located in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Denver.

The Need for Modernization

When Steve Hughes joined KFG in 2003 as the IT director, the company was running Windows 2000 servers and desktops with no dedicated backup system and still relying heavily on paper. There was no quoting or invoicing system in parts of the business, resulting in time-consuming and error-prone processes. Hughes immediately replaced the entire infrastructure and moved to Dell servers and desktops, Cisco network equipment and traditional tape backup to help modernize the company's operations.

The reliance on email and the Internet grew at KFG, just as it did for most businesses. The company was using Microsoft Outlook on its desktops, hosted it through a managed service provider and faced significant challenges. First, as a provider of highly custom, luxury furniture, there are a lot of details communicated via email to manage, such as fabrics, finishes and measurements, during what is often a long sales and delivery cycle. It is critical that the customer support team keep every email and make sure the information is easily accessible. It was not uncommon to have 10GB files clogging up the desktops and network and making it run extremely slow. And for the IT team, the manual defragging and repair process for Outlook files alone was a nightmare according to Hughes, taking him up to four hours each week after close of business.

Another challenge was that they were funneling the Internet through a centralized location using a T1 line in Inglewood, California to the three other physical locations. “That was fine 10 years ago, but because a lot of our suppliers are online and people have to access their sites to look at product catalogs this was no longer a good option,” explained Hughes. “And, if there was an outage in Inglewood, it impacted all the other locations.”

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In addition relying on email and the Internet for much of its business, KFG also has three major applications that it leverages to manage its operations. They have an accounting package, as well as quoting, ordering and invoicing systems for both the showrooms and the manufacturing arm of the business. “We’re not a breaking-edge technology type of company, but we knew we needed to move faster than what we were,” said Hughes. “If these systems are gone, we’re gone.”

KFG never experienced an outage of its servers; however, Hughes did not want to risk it. With the traditional tape backup system they had in place, if a server went down it was a complex and time-consuming process to get it restored from tape with no guarantee it would work. They didn’t have the servers required to actually perform the disaster recovery testing, so it was like flipping a coin to see whether they could recover from the tape or not.

To get buy-in for the new infrastructure, Hughes did multiple four-hour lunch and learns with the president of the company and other managers to educate them on the existing technology platform and where he thought they needed to go in order to help meet the company’s goals and objectives and improve business processes.

Hughes also met with potential IT business partners to determine his best options. The existing partner was only interested in the large infrastructure project, not the smaller jobs. “I started from scratch looking for an IT service provider that I could trust and that could help me decide what technologies were right for our business. With only a two-person IT department, I needed help in researching the options and making decisions that we’d be comfortable with for the next five years.”

An End-to-End Solution

After meeting with IBM and ABC Services and going through an in-depth proposal process, Hughes selected ABC Services as its new IT business partner.

The first project was replacing the infrastructure in the Inglewood data center – converting all the servers to virtual machines, replacing switches, installing a

SAN, etc. Next, they replaced the three servers in each of the showrooms with virtual machines. ABC Services implemented a completely automated and virtualized end-to-end solution for KFG consisting of IBM xSeries Servers, IBM DS Series SAN, IBM UPS', VMware, and Veeam software. The new infrastructure leverages the most current technology and provides KFG with complete data protection and recovery for its mission-critical applications and business processes.

In addition to the various IBM hardware and VMware/Veeam software that was implemented, ABC Services is also providing KFG with several different managed services solutions to assist them with the management and ongoing support of these new technologies. "Email is the life line of our business and we don't have the manpower in-house to train our staff and to manage it," said Hughes. Turning to ABC Services Managed Services was a logical choice for KFG.

Moving in a New Direction

The new infrastructure has significantly improved many of the business processes within the company, specifically enhancing security capabilities, automation, backup and recovery, and speed.

Running on the outdated Windows 2000/2003 servers previously was a significant security risk for KFG. Now, with the Windows 2008 security policies in the active directory its security capabilities have improved 10 fold, according to Hughes. Also, the ability to automate such tasks as group policies in Windows 2008 has been an enormous time savings. For example, in the past, if KFG wanted to add a printer to the desktops, it was done manually. Now, with the group policies, every time a new printer needs to be added, a group policy can be pushed out to automatically add the new printer to every desktop in the company or just in one specific location. The group policies are a huge time savings for administering the IT infrastructure.

By updating its IT infrastructure, KFG is also benefiting from increased efficiency based on improved desktop speeds combined with Office 365. Instead of funneling all the traffic out through the one location, each location now has its own cable or DSL line, offloading 50 people from the main T1 line. This configuration makes the Internet run much faster for everyone in the company, and with Office 365, everyone's files are automatically archived in the cloud, eliminating the need to save everything to their desktop – making everyday life much easier.

Replacing the tape backups is another critical step for KFG. With the tape backup system, the IT team manually loads the tape drive and then

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the off-site service partner picks up the tape(s) to store at their facility. There is a lot of physical handling and there has only been a handful of times when they had to actually pull a file from the tapes.

With the cloud-based backup and recovery service through ABC Services, “we can actually test our data recovery to ensure we can recover from a potential disaster. We will do this twice a year, which is a big change for us. Theoretically, if we had an unrecoverable server crash, we’d have to order a new server and do the recovery. We could be down for two weeks. Now, we can spin up to the cloud backup and, if nothing else, we can set people up with remote desktop sessions to those servers. That’s huge.”

Although the new servers provided local backup for the four physical locations, the KFG data center wasn’t being backed up anywhere. “Now, through ABC Services, our infrastructure will be replicated to their cloud data center and if for some reason our data center goes down, our systems and data will be accessible remotely.”

“It all goes back to customer service,” said Hughes. “We’re pushing ourselves in a new direction by leveraging modern technology. With the infrastructure upgrade, we are now able to replace our small industry-specific SQL database application with an open source CRM and ERP tool. This will change our business and our services to our customers in a way that we never imagined. It allows us to move forward and ABC Services is a big part of that.”

“I would never hesitate to recommend ABC Services,” said Hughes. “They are always introducing new technologies but never push them on us. They are straightforward, very supportive and also honest about what they do and don’t do. They are willing to take on projects big or small and always go above and beyond. They have even done pre-interviews for IT staff to determine if a person is qualified, as well as reviewed other technology proposals, such as for our phone system, to provide their feedback. There is no technology challenge we can’t get past with ABC in our corner.”

Since the date this case study was completed, ABC Services has continued to partner with KFG to enhance its operational processes through technology. The ABC Services team has implemented and provided a wide range of IT solutions and services more recently, some of which include: various server consolidation and virtualization solutions, off-site backup and recovery solutions, managed network services, and data center management and notification solutions.

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