

Dancerace moves to a leading-edge infrastructure with IBM i on BladeCenter

Overview

■ Customer challenge

With growing demand for a hosted version of its asset-based lending solution, Dancerace wanted to find a more flexible and compact alternative to its existing infrastructure. Outstanding reliability and scalability were the prime requirements; Dancerace's clients are also increasingly interested in green credentials.

■ Solution

REAL Solutions, an IBM Premier Business Partner, worked with IBM Express Advantage to create an integrated solution for Dancerace, based around IBM i 6.1 operating system logical partitions running on two IBM BladeCenter JS12 servers in a BladeCenter H chassis, and a SAN based on IBM System Storage DS4800 storage and an LTO4 tape drive.

■ Customer benefits

- IBM i on BladeCenter combines legendary reliability with flexibility and the opportunity to expand easily.
- Compact BladeCenter chassis saves space in the data centre.
- Acquisition costs are equivalent to an Intel processor-based infrastructure.
- IBM Power Architecture can help to save on energy costs; energy efficiency can also help reduce environmental impact, an increasingly important issue for Dancerace's customer base.



Dancerace plc develops and supports asset-based lending solutions for companies in the factoring and invoice discounting industries around the world. With sixteen employees, the company is based in Bath and has recently opened an office in Melbourne, Australia.

Dancerace was the unanimously voted recipient of the Commercial Finance UK 'Business Systems Provider of the Year' award in 2001, and its systems boast an unrivalled reliability record – not a single client has lost a business day to downtime since the implementation of the first Dancerace system in 1994.

"Our clients need their business systems to be available 24x7, and the fact that our solutions run continuously with very little maintenance and almost no downtime is a key selling point," says Anthony Avison, Chairman of Dancerace plc. "To help ensure this level of reliability, we build our software

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on the IBM i platform, which is well known for its stability and ease of management.”

A new business challenge

The company has always been an innovator: it was the first in its sector to build a Web-based interface providing clients with real-time access to their accounts. Two years later, Dancerace also moved into hosting services, determined to stay at the forefront of technology.

As demand for its hosting services increased, the company’s existing IBM i environment, running on a rack-mounted IBM Power Systems server (model i525), was running out of capacity. Purchasing an additional rack-mounted server to provide more headroom was one option, but Anthony Avison had a more ambitious vision.

IBM i on BladeCenter

“IBM announced that it would be possible to run IBM i 6.1 on a new line of POWER6 blade servers, using the IBM Power Architecture,” comments Anthony Avison. “We immediately recognised that this could be a good solution for our business. The BladeCenter platform is much more compact and easy to manage than a traditional rack, and the ability to expand simply by plugging additional blades into the chassis would solve all our scalability problems.”

There were other advantages too. As carbon neutrality and environmental policies become more important to businesses in all sectors, Dancerace wanted to lead the way by cutting down on wasted electricity and heat loss. The modern, energy-efficient design of the BladeCenter

chassis, with its integrated cooling technologies, would help to meet these needs, while also potentially helping to reduce electricity costs.

“Strange as it may seem, there was a cosmetic advantage as well,” comments Anthony Avison. “Clients come to visit our data centre as part of their due diligence process, and the positive impression they take away from the fact that we are using a sleek, modern infrastructure – as opposed to a cluttered group of racks – is very valuable.”

Building confidence

A long-standing relationship with IBM meant it was the natural choice to help Dancerace create the new infrastructure. Anthony Avison comments: “We were the first company in the UK to implement IBM i on BladeCenter, but we had a lot of trust in IBM due to its reputation for reliable innovation and proven track record. Through its Express Advantage programme, IBM was also able to offer us an integrated hardware solution based on our specific needs.”

IBM Express Advantage enables mid-market businesses to work effectively with IBM both directly and through a network of highly-skilled IBM Business Partners. Simple pricing and flexible financing options help businesses create enterprise-class solutions without an enterprise price-tag.

IBM Premier Business Partner REAL Solutions (www.realsolutionsuk.com) also played a key role in the delivery and support of the solution. Dancerace has worked with REAL Solutions for some years, and was impressed with the time and effort that the team put into

researching the best course of action and working with the IBM laboratories in Rochester, Minnesota, to prove the concept.

“REAL Solutions understands our business model, and has considerable expertise in BladeCenter implementations, the POWER architecture, and IBM storage,” explains Anthony Avison. “Their ability to connect us with other reference customers and with IBM internal resources was very valuable in giving us the confidence to go ahead with this solution.”

Proving the concept

Because the POWER6 blade technology was leading-edge, many questions needed to be answered before the implementation could begin. The most important issue for Dancerace was whether the proposed external disk storage system would be able to support enough IBM i partitions to run all the company’s hosted systems.

“In actual fact, the IBM System Storage DS4800 disk system turned out to be much faster than we expected,” says Avison. “This was a real bonus, because it gives us the scope to expand the solution as and when we take on more clients.”

A flexible infrastructure

The flexible and modular structure of both the IBM BladeCenter and the DS4800 storage system means that the infrastructure can be adapted to serve clients of almost any size. Dancerace has installed a BladeCenter H chassis with two IBM BladeCenter JS12 servers, each running one large IBM i 6.1 logical partition and six smaller ones,

matched to the exact requirements of the seven clients whose systems the company currently hosts. The two blades are clustered to provide high availability, and more blades can be added (up to a maximum of fourteen) as and when new clients need to be accommodated.

The company’s old Power Systems i525 machine has been moved to a second site to act as a standby server, and data is mirrored between the two locations to provide a simple recovery strategy in case of disaster.

Performance and energy-efficiency

With the IBM POWER6 processors and high-speed storage infrastructure in place, Dancerace experienced a substantial improvement in performance straight away. As well as being faster than previous generations of processors, the POWER6 chipset requires less power and generates less heat. This is increasingly relevant in a world where green credentials are seen as adding value to a business.

“One day we know we will be approached by a carbon-neutral client and we want to get ahead of the game,” says Anthony Avison. “The IBM BladeCenter solution has allowed us to do just that by decreasing the size of our carbon footprint, while saving on energy bills.”

The pioneer spirit

“As the first in our field to embark on such a project, we spent some money on research and development that others will benefit from in the future,” comments Anthony Avison. “Nevertheless, we feel that for this level of performance, the solution is very cost-effective – at around £7,000 per partition for the hardware, storage

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and operating system, it's certainly no more expensive than a comparable Intel-based infrastructure.

"More importantly, we see the BladeCenter platform as a real opportunity for the IBM i community. In the past, companies have often recognised the superiority of the IBM i operating system, but the need to buy specific hardware has been a barrier to entry. Now, since you can simply plug a POWER6 blade into the same chassis as your Intel or AMD blades, it is much easier to take a best-of-breed approach. By levelling the playing field for i, IBM will help more customers benefit from the stability and performance of this excellent platform."

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