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The Jumeirah Group is a true home grown brand with global aspirations and one that is on an aggressive growth path. The group, which is already one of the largest hospitality firms in the UAE with 10,400 employees and 3000 computer users, has several iconic properties in Dubai, like the Burj Al Arab, some worldwide and is working on more global sites.

"We have been growing at a fast clip and the aim is to reach 50 to 60 hotels by 2011," says David Teklit, group director of IT infrastructure and IT security, Jumeirah Group. And that growth is just the hotel division.

Befitting an organisation that wants to become a global player of note, the Jumeirah Group pays a lot of attention to technology.

"I would like to quote my CEO here. He always says that information technology is the cornerstone of the organisation. IT infrastructure is the glue that sticks things together and there is no part of the business that IT does not touch. We constantly try to innovate and use technology as a competitive weapon in the marketplace. We use technology to stay different from the competition and to ensure that we always have an edge," says Teklit.

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So crucial does the group consider technology that it has often implemented IT systems way before its peers in the region. The group began using Microsoft's Windows Rights Management Services to secure sensitive content way back in 2004

and according to Teklit, this was the first implementation of its kind outside the United States.

It has also been extensively using solutions and systems for remote infrastructure management that allows Teklit's team to predict and analyse troubles on the group's growing network, covering its set of global properties.

The company constantly tries to improve, upgrade and add to its network and infrastructure components to achieve higher efficiency and add more services.

Jumeirah Group's recent implementation of a remote access solution is a good example of its use of technology to reach its goals as well as the processes it strictly follows to achieve optimum benefits.

Remotely yours

"The network is the core foundation of Jumeirah's IT Infrastructure. It brings together applications, systems, storage and every aspect of IT," states Teklit.

With the group expanding beyond home shores and setting up more offices and properties globally, Teklit felt the need to ensure the highest efficiency levels on the network while delivering optimum performance.

"We considered a remote access solution since it would help us centralise our applications at a primary location. It would also be a reliable way to provide access to our remote users, even those who are travelling," says Teklit.

The company surveyed various solutions from different vendors and piloted some before picking Citrix's remote access solution.

"There were two key reasons for selecting the Citrix access solution. The first was that it allowed us to manage and operate applications centrally which reduced complexity at the remote site as well as improved efficiency levels at the headquarters. The second reason was bandwidth. As we all know the cost of bandwidth in the UAE is extremely high and this is a big challenge. We found Citrix's

Presentation server to be the best choice to deliver applications on a limited bandwidth," says Teklit.

The company also considered the need to enforce high levels of security when opening up apps for remote access.



"Our challenge is to combine expansion and growth with using technology." David Teklit, group director of IT infrastructure and IT security at the Jumeirah Group.

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"We had to ensure effective security around the apps. We decided to go for a centralised solution with strong second factor authentication. For this purpose we chose RSA SecureID with its authentication manager. The token is used in conjunction with the user's network login password and automatically generated passcode. To top that up for some key users we also encode a four digit PIN code that is known only to the user. We needed to ensure that we have a secure environment using tools and technology that are user friendly and RSA SecureID gave us the balance we needed to achieve this goal," says Teklit.

Having selected the solution, the IT team had a meeting with Citrix to discuss design and implementation parameters.

Teklit and his team then put the system through a rigorous testing process in the firm's test lab. According to Teklit, most products are put through a test before being implemented since this helps them assess its performance and evaluate any bottlenecks they might face. This reduces trouble-shooting and cuts down on time during the production phase.

"We needed a bit of customisation and changes during the testing phase when the user interface had to be changed to reflect the visual guides that the users were familiar with. We also had to remove certain analysis elements in Citrix and mitigate risk with other security parameters. Apart from that, the implementation was a smooth process and deployment was finished in four weeks," says Teklit.

The project did not call for undue changes to the company's infrastructure as well apart from the addition of servers and a separate leased line for bandwidth. The project went live in October 2006. Teklit states that there has been positive response from users.

Answering the call

Another significant deployment for the company involved the use of an Avaya solution for the firm's global call centre which works out of Dubai. The importance of the call centre cannot be overstated since it handles reservations and queries from potential customers around the world.

The firm migrated from a Mitel to an Avaya platform for a centralised call centre solution which operates 24 X 7 and is expected to grow to 120 agents in the coming year. The infrastructure is based on Avaya 8300 servers, Avaya media gateways and IP client agents integrated with various applications. The implementation was carried out by EMW (East Meets West).

"The call centre receives calls from more than 30 toll free numbers in various regions. As the call centre plays a significant role in our business, we ensure that the network and the platform that support it are highly available and redundant in nature. In an event of service outage at the call centre site we do have a disaster recovery site where we can continue to receive calls with very minimal impact to the business," says Teklit.

Apart from the call centre, the group is also planning on implementing VoIP across all its hotel properties.

"We have some VoIP implementation in some of our properties already. We are

going to take that to the next level with voice over wireless. We have implemented wireless in some hotels - like the Jumeirah Beach Hotel which uses Trapeze Technology - but we want to roll it out across the group. This will help the back office staff to use their mobile phones without being charged by the service provider. It will also provide additional convenience to guests who can travel from one property to another with full roaming capability on their laptop and mobile devices," says Teklit.

The recipe for success

The Jumeirah group has managed to constantly derive return on investment and continuing benefits from its IT investments. There are several reasons for this. The primary one is that the IT team - with a total of 80 personnel, 23 of whom are at the corporate level - is geared to think in terms of business and organisational benefits.

"A lot goes around in the IT department and we tend to have a lot of projects at any one time - and all are quite important. Our challenge is to combine expansion and growth with using technology. In some companies, especially in hotels, IT is just a support function to business. We do more than just support. We use IT to bring value to the business. We want to drive growth whether in revenues, marketshare or loyalty. This is what drives us and it is quite challenging," says Teklit.

The annual budgeting process for IT makes evident the close tie between business functions and technology at the Jumeirah Group.

"At the beginning of the year we consider initiatives across different businesses. There is an IT steering committee which is headed by the CTO and members include the CEO and the chief officers of almost all departments. This committee prioritises IT projects based on the company's direction, growth and what's critical for customers," says Teklit.

IT infrastructure at Jumeirah

- Core Switches - Foundry RX Series
- Edge Switches - Foundry Fast Iron and Edge Iron switches
- Routers - Juniper J6300 and Cisco 2800 Routers

- Firewalls - Cisco PIX firewalls
- Voice Systems - Avaya 8300 and media gateways (VOIP)
- Servers - HP Proliant Series
- WAN Optimization - Juniper WX Series
- Network Operating Systems - Microsoft Windows 2003 Servers
- Remote Access - Citrix Systems
- Directory Services - Microsoft Active Directory 2003



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This goes hand in hand with operational budgets which cover the maintenance and support of existing infrastructure. Businesses are also welcome to put in specific project requests based on their needs and the IT team works on them as they come up.

"We involve the business divisions in IT to a large extent and this is true even in the selection process. When it comes to pure technology, such as the Citrix implementation, the IT team does extensive research, looks at various technologies and take security into account. But when it comes to applications, especially those which would be used by different departments, we call in the people to give their suggestions," states Teklit.

The selection process involves the floating of a tender, followed by a shortlisting of vendors. An invitation is sent out to people of different functions who would be using

the system and a demo is organised based on their requirements. The business units are then asked to decide from what they have seen.

"Our motto is that if it's an app the users should decide. We can run any technology and if the app is not at all compatible then we will advise on the same. That is how we go about systems that are heavily used. This includes property management, HR and finance that are critical for day to day operations. When you involve people who use these systems early, there is minimal need for change management during implementation and transformation is easy with the buy in. That is our strategy and process," says Teklit.

The team also brings the same drive and efficiency to supporting customers and, according to Teklit, a large part of the team members who function in different properties are present to guide and educate guests to use the technology in their rooms.

The end of the road?

The Jumeirah Group continues to research, implement and use technology to differentiate itself and to provide better services to its clients. According to Teklit, the most important project that is on his plate at the moment is the movement of the current datacenter to a Tier III level.

"We have distributed server rooms where each hotel or property has its own. This is because there are certain guest facing apps which have to reside in the hotel. The primary datacenters is in Dubai and my work will involve moving it to the Tier III level. We are in talks with service providers to ensure this move, which is critical to us. The datacentre has served us well so far but the growth of the company necessitates the pumping in of new apps and the upgrading of everything mechanical, electrical and physical security oriented," says Teklit.

The Jumeirah group is also planning on a business continuity and disaster recovery site in the near future to ensure that the firm's information remains well protected.

"We are actually in the process of building a DR site. That's one of our primary projects for next year. We are trying to keep it as far away from business as possible

- maybe 15 to 20 km away. We are looking at various places at the moment," states Teklit.

The technology team is also involved in upgrading the current backbone used by the hotel business.

"Three years ago we had overhauled the network to streamline IT operations and remove complexities that arose from the fast expansion of Jumeirah and now in 2007 we are building the next generation network to support the future growth of Jumeirah," says Teklit.

"In this exercise we have partnered with both local service providers (Etisalat and du) to replace our ATM, point to point leased circuits with MPLS based IP VPNs and metro Ethernet technologies that will enable us to build highly robust and resilient networks. We are also engaging international service providers to deliver business critical applications to our world wide sites via a managed MPLS network as opposed to the traditional site to site IPsec VPN tunnels. On the LAN side we will be upgrading the network to 10Gbit/s to the wiring closet," he adds.

The IT team constantly works on capacity management and maintains a buffer of 30% to 40% to accommodate the fast pace of growth across the group. Teklit is also involved in designing network architecture and components for other businesses within the group.

One certainly cannot accuse the Jumeirah Group's IT team of taking it easy.

The Jumeirah Group Hotels

Current Portfolio

Dubai

- Jumeirah Beach Hotel
- Madinat Jumeirah
- Burj Al Arab
- Jumeirah Emirates Towers

- Jumeirah Bab Al Shams Desert Resort & Spa

London

- Jumeirah Carlton Tower
- Jumeirah Lowndes Hotel

New York

- Jumeirah Essex House

Future Portfolio - Under Development

Dubai

- Jumeirah Desert Pearl at Aqua Dunya, Dubailand
- Jumeirah Creekside Park Hotel (Dubai Healthcare City)
- Jumeirah Business Bay Hotel (Business Bay)
- Jumeirah Beach Club Resort & Spa (Currently closed for a complete re-development)
- Jumeirah Al Fattan Palm Resort, Palm Jumeirah

Abu Dhabi

- Jumeirah Etihad Towers

Jordan

- Saraya Aqaba

Qatar

- Jumeirah Dubai Towers

Phuket

- Jumeirah Private Island Resort Phuket

China

- HanTang Jumeirah Shanghai

Bermuda

- Jumeirah Southlands Resort

London

- The Jumeirah Hotel at Beetham Tower