OpenText manages European data centres with ‘two pairs of eyes’
More and more data centre managers working in enterprise organisations are confronted with an ever-changing infrastructure. Often this is the result of business acquisitions. A consolidation in which all facilities are concentrated in several big data centre facilities is not always possible. Nevertheless, all the important applications must be permanently available and perform satisfactorily for (internal) clients.

How do we approach this?

Together with Royal HaskoningDHV, Jan Huntelaar, Manager Data Centres Operations & Facilities EMEA at OpenText, has developed an interesting approach. He now manages his European data centres with ‘2 pairs of eyes’.

‘Many big companies are constantly changing,’ says Jan Huntelaar in his office in Amstelveen. He is responsible for around 35 data centre facilities within the EMEA region. ‘Many acquisitions are completed, business units disposed of, partnerships entered into for shorter or longer periods, all kinds of scenarios. So many businesses are growing very fast and also getting more focus.’
Challenges
For the departments that are responsible for data centre operations, this obviously creates the necessary challenges. When preparing an acquisition, for example, a due diligence study is naturally performed. This checks the fit in terms of finance, products and market position of the party being acquired. An aspect that is less often addressed is how the IT approach of an organisation being acquired fits with the strategy.

‘When you look at OpenText, that’s logical. Obviously our aim is to achieve autonomous growth. But we also expressly look for opportunities to acquire interesting new products or businesses with an interesting client portfolio.’

Fast Growth
OpenText is originally a Canadian company that focuses on what is known as ‘Enterprise Information Management’. This includes a series of software products and services for the safe recording, management and use of all content that is important to an organisation (documents, files, etc). This concern has grown rapidly in recent years, particularly due to the above-mentioned combination of autonomous growth and acquisitions.

As a result, a new company is regularly added to OpenText. This company has its own software products which are offered to clients on the basis of an IT and data centre strategy developed by that firm. Huntelaar: ‘Sometimes it might be a company that manages everything itself. In other cases a company may have a lot of software with Amazon, for example, or they may have partnered with a colocation supplier. And sometimes we encounter a mix of strategies.’
Rationalisation

All these data centre strategies must be brought together in one way or another. How does someone like Huntelaar manage that?

Initially, the most obvious solution might be to embark on a rationalisation of the IT and data centre approach by migrating ‘everything’ as quickly as possible to one standard software platform and one standardised data centre environment.

Not feasible

In practice, that’s often unsuccessful,’ Huntelaar explains. ‘OpenText naturally acquires a business to be able to grow in turnover and profit, as well as acquire new clients and products. Key to this is that the existing clients of the firms being acquired can continue to use their software normally and for the agreed price.

A major operation during which we migrate all this kind of software to one or more standardised IT and data centre environments is therefore very risky and expensive. Particularly because OpenText regularly does acquisitions and our data centre infrastructure is therefore constantly changing. That’s why we’ve chosen a different approach.’

That approach was developed in partnership with the Brownfield Projects department at Royal HaskoningDHV. ‘We’ve been working with OpenText since 2016,’ says Marco Wenzkowski from Royal HaskoningDHV. ‘This mainly involves what we call “baseline audits”. If migrating to a new environment is not feasible, that obviously doesn’t mean that no improvements are possible in the various locations that form the data centre infrastructure of OpenText.

With a baseline audit, we say what can be improved regarding - particularly - the electrical and cooling capacity at a location. And what does such an improvement or expansion produce?

Expressed financially, but also in terms of reliability and availability. And very important: future perspective and flexibility. The choices that are made today must never become a limitation in the future.’

Because brownfield projects require a different way of working and different competencies from employees, Royal HaskoningDHV has decided to create a separate team for these projects.

The knowledge of the internal organisation, the operation, work processes, etc of clients is usually not available to teams working on greenfield projects.
**Good insight**

A key element in such research is gaining good insight into the data centre infrastructure as it is used at the moment of that research. Huntelaar: ‘Here I must explain the term “data centre infrastructure”. Sometimes - like here in Amstelveen, for example - it’s a “full-blown” data centre with several rooms. But it might also refer to smaller facilities where there are only a handful of racks.’

Is a good description of the technical environment of such a facility always available? Wenzkowski: ‘I was initially worried that there wouldn’t be much information available. But fortunately that hasn’t proved to be the case. However, there are a few points we should mention. For example, there may often be quite a lot of data present, but it is not always up to date. And the format in which this information is available varies considerably - from spreadsheets to databases and from text documents to PDF drawings. Nevertheless, there is almost always a basis, which we then check with a site survey and supplement or adapt.’

**Living document**

The result of a baseline audit is what Huntelaar and Wenzkowski call a ‘living document’. ‘That’s a textual description with lots of diagrams,’ Wenzkowski explains. Huntelaar adds: ‘It’s very important that it also includes “financial forecasting” based on scenarios.’

This is important because the partnership between OpenText and Royal HaskoningDHV has two objectives. Firstly, to ensure that the technical infrastructure of the existing activities of Open Text is available 24/7 and that it offers the performance agreed with the clients. In addition, the parties want to ensure that the entire data centre infrastructure of OpenText is well prepared for new acquisitions and takeovers.
Scenarios

‘That’s why we work with scenarios. These indicate what needs to be done technically, so that a facility can continue to comply with the wishes and requirements of OpenText regarding availability, costs and performance. Incidentally, this demands quite a lot from our employees who have often developed a facility themselves. And who we are now asking to be involved in changing their work.’

‘Furthermore, if we know that OpenText regularly adds new elements, we can obviously prepare our data centre people too. For example by drawing up scenarios in which we look at, say, the electrical power we need in a certain room of the data centre. Now, but also when another acquisition is completed. How much extra IT equipment can we then install? And then we can also estimate how much we will need to invest and what other technical measures are required if we take certain growth steps.’

This way of working offers great advantages. Sometimes it’s - also financially - more useful to bring forward a certain expansion relating to power boards, for example. ‘So that an acquisition that will be completed in some time can be more easily accommodated in the data centre infrastructure.

Particularly because we have prepared ourselves with the growth of the available capacity.’
Facilities and IT
Huntelaar: ‘What we wanted to move away from - and we’re managing this much better - is a situation in which we have to improvise a lot. If I know how much electrical capacity we have left at a certain location, room or even in certain racks, it’s easier for me to assess the impact of a new acquisition on the available capacity. I then have a fairly good idea when I’m going to be short of power and where. If I then have scenarios that provide good insight into the expansions needed to accommodate such acquisitions and install the corresponding new IT equipment, I can weigh up the costs and benefits more easily. In other words: this approach lets me draw up very realistic investment plans.’

An interesting aspect of this approach is that we don’t just look at the technical infrastructure of a facility or a series of locations. A site survey charts the approach and status of the power and cooling of a facility, for example. But the results must be immediately linked to the expected occupation of racks and rooms with IT equipment. Wenzkowski: ‘So actually, we’re really engaged in a form of data centre management whereby we not only manage the technical side of the facility, but also include some of the IT layer. These two aspects are indispensably linked.’

Maintenance management
Royal HaskoningDHV has now subjected the first facilities of OpenText to a baseline audit, both in the Netherlands and in Germany. This will be gradually extended in the near future. But we are also aiming to achieve more intense cooperation. Huntelaar: ‘We’re also looking at the way we can use suppliers and engineers, for example. The living document a data centre facility produces obviously provides a great basis for technical maintenance and management. We expressly want to use this document for that purpose.’

Huntelaar would like to have the management and maintenance coordinated through one main contractor who plans and implements his or her activities based on a facility maintenance management system, for example. Wenzkowski: ‘This way of working is often used in industry. Royal HaskoningDHV supports around 200 industrial parties and government organisations with this way of organising and implementing maintenance and management. Where the main contractor is responsible for achieving several goals agreed with the client (KPIs) and in turn makes agreements with one or more subcontractors. The activities of the main contractor are then monitored by an internal or external party, for example the maintenance manager.’

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