

SHODEN DATA SYSTEMS:

COMPLEX DATA CENTRE SOLUTIONS, SIMPLE BUSINESS PRINCIPLES





WHEN SHODEN DATA SYSTEMS OPENED ITS DOORS BACK IN 2000, THINGS WERE LOOKING RATHER UNCERTAIN FOR THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY. A LONG BOOM HAD JUST COME TO A CATASTROPHIC END. BUSINESSES WERE CLOSING LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE. AND ITS VERY GENESIS WAS IN A COMPANY THAT MADE A DECISION TO DROP ONE VENDOR IN FAVOUR OF ANOTHER. BUT IT IS JUST THAT GUMPTION THAT SAW THE COMPANY FOUNDERS SEE OPPORTUNITY WITHIN THE SERIOUS ADVERSITY OF THE END OF THE DOTCOM ERA THAT LAY THE SEEDS FOR A DECADE OF SUCCESS.

WORDS DONOVAN JACKSON

Marc Trevenen, Shoden's managing director, explains that when a company for which most of the founders worked effectively decided to end its relationship with Hitachi Data Systems (HDS), the chance at self-determination was clear. "There were 11 of us, mostly technical guys, and every one with over a decade of experience and knowledge on Hitachi. We took the plunge and started Shoden."

He singles out the presence of Trevor Koekemoer, services and support director, on the Shoden team. "In Trevor we had one of the most experienced people on the HDS product set; he brought with him deep knowledge of Hitachi, having worked with the vendor in its factory for years. That was essential in allowing Shoden to set up service-level agreements, support structures and escalation procedures that are necessary in high-performance computing environments."

With an existing market in South Africa, and with the support of a vendor that needed to maintain continuity in the country for those clients, Shoden got off to a steady start.

Right at the outset – given the knowledge of individuals who worked hands-on with critical data centre equipment – the focus on underlying business principles was simple but profound. "We all knew what our clients needed of us. They didn't just require the tin; they could buy that anywhere. What they needed was the assurance of support and service that is a fundamental part of creating value in a data centre environment," Trevenen explains.

The objective was clear: maintain the strength of the Hitachi brand in the data centre by delivering the support and services that are required of high-availability environments. "We had the expertise, we had the will and we had the backing of the vendor itself. We also had a good number of clients, so from the start, we were well equipped to get underway."

HITACHI DATA SYSTEMS

Mark Slade, Shoden's sales and business development director, delves deeper into the relationship with HDS. "Around this time, HDS announced a major upgrade of its storage array technology with the Lightning 9960 while also moving into midrange storage systems with its Thunder range. The result was a leap forward in terms of performance and scalability; of course, cost at this time in the industry was a major consideration, too," he says.

Meanwhile, a major vendor competing with HDS was enduring some of its darkest days. "It was a fortuitous time; HDS was taking the market by storm with superior technology that was even being rebranded by Hewlett-Packard," Slade says.

With its sound value proposition, the fledgling company's client base expanded quickly. Shaun Barendsen, Shoden's national sales and marketing

manager, hastens to point out that most of those clients are still with the company a decade on. “Even though it was a shaky time for the IT industry as a whole, the explosion of storage was a big thing with the growth in the internet, expanding corporate information with more e-mail and electronic documents and so on. As a company able to deliver great technologies and expertise, our value proposition struck a chord,” he notes.

MORE TECHNOLOGY, ALL IN THE DATA CENTRE

While HDS has always held a central focus for Shoden, it isn’t the only solution set offered by the company. Since Shoden is a data centre specialist, and since there is a lot more than just storage arrays in any data centre, further opportunities quickly became apparent. Once again, Shoden aligned with leading technology innovators: On the server side, for example, the company struck up a partnership with Fujitsu Limited, another Japanese technology giant, while a sound competence in the Storage Area Networking (SAN) environment was also forged by working with Brocade and Cisco.

Displaying characteristic insight, Shoden also introduced data de-duplication into South Africa by partnering with Data Domain. Trevenen says the company also has relationships with Symantec and CommVault as well as several other vendors. “Efficient backup and restore has also become a key solution set that we offer,” he notes.

The process of consolidation within the storage solutions environment has had an interesting effect on Shoden, Trevenen relates. “We’ve had situations where specialist vendors with which we are aligned have been acquired. That is, in some respects, a little frustrating, but on the other hand, we view it as an affirmation of our ability to identify and introduce appropriate data centre technologies that help meet the goals of our customers,” he says.

Coming back to server technology, Slade explains that Fujitsu is a substantial player in the SPARC/Solaris environment. That’s something that wasn’t particularly well known in the mid-2000s. “However, with an internationally proven reputation and high-end computing capabilities that led benchmarks, we were confident in the technology. And we had a proven capability to deliver the service and support,” he says.

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Today, Fujitsu servers are broadly used in the financial services and telecoms industries in South Africa.

The successes that Shoden has delivered in growing the market presence of the vendors that it represents are consistent, perhaps owing to the philosophy the company takes when partnering. It’s a considered view that is informed primarily by the desire to understand and meet the needs of the company’s clients. “That is what our entire value proposition rests upon,” confirms Trevenen. “And that’s what we ask ourselves when looking

at a new technology or a new vendor: does this address a problem in industry? If yes and we can see the potential to help our customers, we take it further.”

And the partnership is built on reciprocity, hard work, investment and focus. “Unless you bring the passion and commitment, value for the customer will not result,” confirms Slade.

That’s another common thread for Shoden. Koekemoer says when it comes to the service and support, which all four men agree is a cornerstone of what the company delivers, Shoden takes full responsibility for the solutions it provides. “Data centres are complex and the component technologies are all interlinked. When you do something on one side, it can affect something else on the other. We know that and we always follow through to ensure that the anticipated outcome is met.”

SKILLS, SKILLS, SKILLS... AND RETENTION

In the data centre, talk probably won’t get you past the door, let alone into ‘mission-critical’ environments. Skill and experience, therefore, consistently come up as the differentiator for Shoden as a company. Today, with a 135-strong staff, the value of people remains as central as it was when the business first opened its doors. Trevenen is proud of the company’s track record with personnel: “Our attrition rate is really low; I think we’ve had less than one percent of our people leave in the past decade,” he says. Koekemoer notes: “One of them is working in our UK office, so he didn’t really leave.”

Since Shoden places such a premium on people – and skills – its Shoden Academy is a facility that plays a key role in equipping individuals with the high-end skills and experience required to meet customer needs. “That’s also played a part in enabling us to augment the on-site skills of our clients as required,” says Slade.

As the company looks forward to the next decade, its senior staff are confident in the simple principles that continue to underpin Shoden Data Systems. “As long as we take the time to understand what our customers need, add the insight and experience to find the solutions to those needs and bring the technology that enables those solutions, we believe we will always have a bright future,” Trevenen concludes. **B**