BOX OFFICE GOLD

Dell™ PowerEdge™ M1000e modular blade enclosures helped Soho VFX deliver a Hollywood blockbuster on deadline—more than doubling the company's processing capacity while helping reduce power consumption by 20 percent.

CHALLENGE

Artists at visual effects studio Soho VFX work under intense pressure to meet tight deadlines—requiring highly reliable and dependable systems that allow them to focus on their creativity.

SOLUTION

Soho VFX deployed a new server farm based on Dell PowerEdge M1000e modular blade enclosures, which more than doubled the company's processing capacity while helping reduce power consumption by 20 percent.

BENEFITS

- Quick deployment of Dell PowerEdge blade servers got Soho VFX running in days instead of weeks.
- Dell PowerEdge blade server farm more than doubled existing processing capacity while helping reduce power consumption by 20 percent.
- Dell PowerEdge modular blade enclosure helped simplify IT maintenance and reduce administration time.
- Dell PowerEdge blade server reliability helped minimize downtime during critical projects.

Related Categories:

Blade servers, case study, Dell PowerEdge blade servers, Dell Precision workstations, power management, Soho VFX

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In the film industry, timing is everything—and for film effects production businesses like Toronto-based Soho VFX, release dates are do-or-die deadlines. Soho VFX makes the impossible happen for Hollywood blockbusters. "Audiences expect to see stunts that can't be performed without harming somebody, and camera angles that can't be shot in the real world," says Allan Magled, a Soho VFX partner. To help ensure that it meets its demanding film industry deadlines, Soho VFX relies exclusively on Dell servers and workstations. "Dell suits our needs best," says Magled. "The company understands how its technology fits in with our business."

Soho VFX constantly differentiates itself with high-quality, on-time output. "Each new project brings new challenges, because it's usually bigger and more complicated than anything we've done before," says Magled. The company faced just such a challenge when working on two movies scheduled for release on successive weeks in 2008: *The Incredible Hulk* on June 13 and *The Love Guru* on June 20. It quickly became clear that the technical demands of *The Incredible Hulk*, combined with the tight schedule, would swamp the company's existing systems. "Everybody wants to see their stuff rendered right away, so it's nonstop processing," explains Magled.

Magled and the Soho VFX IT team estimated that they must at least double their processing capacity without overwhelming the company's limited physical and power resources. "There was no way that we could get where we needed to be by just adding more 1U servers to our racks," says Berj Bannayan, a Soho VFX partner. "The new equipment had to fit in our server room and run on our existing power and cooling systems."

DEPLOYING HIGH-PERFORMANCE BLADE SERVERS

The Soho VFX team had previously considered but not adopted blade servers, and Magled was wary of committing to a new technology in the middle of an important project. However, his past experiences with Dell gave him confidence that the deployment would be a success: Soho VFX had previously standardized

on Dell Precision™ workstations, which delivered the processing power necessary to build the models that would eventually be rendered on the company's server farm. "We've been using Dell Precision workstations for years. As we grow, we just keep purchasing more because they provide fantastic power and value," says Magled. "It's because of products such as the Dell Precision workstations that we have complete confidence in Dell as our technology partner."

Dell responded by exceeding Magled's expectations immediately after he placed the order. "The Dell team initially said that we would have the equipment in two weeks," says Magled. "I asked them to work as fast as they could because we were under such time pressure. Dell had the new enclosure and blade servers in our office in four days. I was shocked. I'd never seen a company do that before."

The Soho VFX IT team deployed 128 Dell PowerEdge M600 server blades housed in 8 Dell PowerEdge M1000e modular blade enclosures. The PowerEdge M600 blades use Intel® Xeon® processors and Gigabit Ethernet network interface cards for fast throughput and flexibility, while the PowerEdge M1000e enclosure is designed to provide the kind of high-performance scalability and power efficiency that Soho VFX requires. The artists use a mix of Dell Precision 380, Dell Precision 390, and Dell Precision T3400 workstations with dual Intel Core™2 Duo processors running the Linux® OS, each equipped with two Dell UltraSharp™ 2407WFP 24-inch widescreen flat-panel monitors that deliver the fast refresh time and color fidelity necessary for world-class animation work.

INCREASING CAPACITY WHILE REDUCING ENERGY USE

The simplicity and design of the Dell PowerEdge blade servers enabled the Soho VFX IT team to take advantage of

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> —Michael Todd Smith
> System administrator at Soho VFX
> July 2008

the increased processing capabilities in days instead of waiting several weeks as they would with a standard server deployment. "I could set up a rack of 16 PowerEdge blades faster than I could set up a single 1U server, which usually took a full day," says Michael Todd Smith, system administrator at Soho VFX.

The Dell PowerEdge blade servers also enabled the Soho VFX IT team to exceed its goal for increasing processing capacity. Where there had been three racks and 500 processors, Soho VFX now had 8 enclosures with 128 server blades for a total of 1,024 processors. At the same time, Soho VFX was able to cut its physical and power requirements because the Dell PowerEdge M1000e enclosures take up less space, emit less heat, and use 20 percent less electricity than the rack servers they replaced. "For the floor space they use, the Dell blades are the best thing I've ever seen," says Bannayan. "We didn't have to expand any of our power or cooling requirements, and our power consumption dropped by 20 percent."

Smith estimates that because the company standardized on Dell servers and workstations, he saves four hours in maintenance time every week. "By using Dell solutions, we can focus on creativity that allows us to push the envelope on the work we do for the studios, rather than worrying about IT," says Smith.

MEETING DEMANDING DEADLINES

The Soho VFX team used their new Dell PowerEdge server farm 24 hours a day for weeks on *The Incredible Hulk,* bringing the project in on deadline. "Without this new technology, we wouldn't have been able to complete the work on the movie," says Bannayan. The Dell systems worked well even in Soho VFX's demanding environment. "I'm surprised those Dell blades are still alive after what we put them through, but they never missed a beat," says Magled.

Because studios insist on keeping the details of new films under wraps, Magled can't talk about the company's next project. But whatever challenges his clients throw at him—whether in terms of timing or artistic rendering—he knows that he can rely on Dell to deliver the latest and greatest in technology in record time so Soho VFX can meet deadlines and create breathtaking work.

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