

# Top Service



A National Business to Business Centre Showcase



## Background

**Top Service, specialists in construction industry credit information, recognised that their industry is changing rapidly and their IT infrastructure needed a complete review to cope with these changes and stay ahead of the competition.**

The company started trading as a partnership in 1991, founded by Kevin Halligan and Lisa Cardus, and incorporated as a limited company in 1998. Traditionally credit reports had been in hard copy and faxed or posted to customers, however the advent of new technology resulted in most of the company's competitors offering credit information on CDs and via the web. Top Service realised that they had to adapt and look at the new opportunities offered by technology; they were actually losing customers who preferred a faster 'high-tech' option over their paper-based products. To exacerbate the problem the company did not have the right IT infrastructure. Their server was outdated and no longer supported, and their database technology was unsuitable for providing customers with information electronically.

Like many small businesses the company felt it was getting further and further behind with business technology. Neither Kevin nor Lisa were particularly technically minded, they developed their IT and computer skills on an 'as and when needed' basis, and had just enough Microsoft products to be able to run the business. There was little

investment in new technology as their past experience had been that hardware and software upgrades were expensive and time consuming.

## Solutions

The founders, along with the Operations Director Matt Ricketts, contacted the National Business to Business Centre for help. After an initial meeting the Centre introduced Top Service to a number of possible solutions to their problems, both proprietary and open source. The company had not heard of open source and were wary that it would require a level of technical expertise they did not possess, however after exploring the technology further they realised it could be a viable option for their business.

After considering both cost and efficiency factors, Top Service decided to opt for an open source (Linux) based replacement for their ageing Windows NT4 server, whilst retaining their existing Windows-based desktop application. The server was sourced from Zybert Computing Ltd, who provided a complete hardware, software and support solution, including a user-friendly administrative interface. As a result, Top Service is now working with a fast and efficient server and operations within the office have been speeded up considerably. The cost of the solution was around £2,500; the proprietary solution would have cost up to four times more.

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Operations Director Matt Ricketts observes "Our decision basically came down to having to buy a new server with Microsoft Small Business Server 2003 or a Linux server. I was apprehensive about Linux and open source in general as I had always assumed that it was something only 'techies' used and was not very user-friendly. Since buying the Linux server I have found it easier to use than our old Windows NT server. Things like adding new users and setting administration rights are far simpler, e-mail handling and backup solutions are also much improved. By not going down the proprietary route and having to pay for over 30 user licences we have saved around £10,000. This means our IT budget can be better spent on IT support, training and further application development – something we had to put off until now".

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Implementing the new solution was relatively problem-free due to the support from Zybert Computing and the B2B Centre. Much of the work was done during the evenings and weekends as the business could not afford to be without their server during office hours.

The company's credit information database had outgrown the

Microsoft Access software that they were using and was experiencing regular technical problems. The B2B team helped the company to evaluate all of their options which included both Microsoft and open source products. Top Service decided to retain their Microsoft Access front ends because they had already invested in twenty-five licences, but to migrate the database to MySQL, an open source database, to provide a secure and robust environment. The company intends to investigate a fully open source alternative as they continue to grow.

## **Training**

Matt Ricketts comments "I initially learnt as much as I could about MySQL and I received a lot of help and support from the B2B Centre. I wanted to be able to master basic MySQL skills as our databases tend to evolve over time and I wanted to be able to make changes myself."

Matt, Lisa and Kevin have all enrolled on a two-day training course on MySQL and PHP which is being run by Open Advantage, a unique initiative providing West Midlands-based businesses with free consultancy, training and workshops about open source software and how best to use it.

***"The B2B Centre gave us some much-needed advice... so the whole process went pretty smoothly"***

## **Website**

The company is now in the process of developing a state-of-the-art website, safe in the knowledge that it can be powered by an efficient and modern supporting infrastructure. Lisa comments: "I am tempted to say that we have completed our website, but it will probably be permanent work in progress as it will grow and develop along with the business. The B2B Centre gave us some much-needed advice about helping to select a reputable website developer, so the whole process went pretty smoothly. We selected a small, local development company, Crave Creative, not only because they were technically able to complete the project but also because they shared our passion for customer service."

***If you would like to talk to Top Service about their experience, or find out how your business can achieve what they did, contact the National Business to Business Centre now at [www.nb2bc.co.uk](http://www.nb2bc.co.uk). To see how companies like yours have addressed their e-business issues visit the showcase area of our website at [www.nb2bc.co.uk/showcases](http://www.nb2bc.co.uk/showcases)***



**The National Business to Business Centre**

Helping growing businesses make smart e-business decisions

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