


Logicalis Teams with Valassis on a Total Data Center Transformation that Includes a Major In-Sourcing Migration



Valassis (NSE:VCI) is a leading global organization offering media and marketing services to more than 15,000 advertisers. A pioneer of the newspaper coupon booklet, and one of the largest media buyers in the US, Valassis delivers more than 10 billion media impressions a year. Headquartered in Livonia, Michigan, Valassis has 7,000 associates in 28 states and nine countries.

As happens with many successful organizations, during the course of mergers and acquisitions and changing business needs, data centers had started to proliferate within Valassis. Rather than allowing the proliferation to continue, Valassis IT, with the full support of senior corporate executives, decided the time had come to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of its overall data center needs and implement a strategy that would rein in the runaway operating costs, inefficiencies, and risks associated with the patchwork configuration that Valassis's IT infrastructure had become over the years.

To help identify the company's present and future requirements, evaluate all of its options, and make the best technology choices, Valassis needed a partner with a range of skills that extended from the engineering, design, and development of physical data center facilities to the management and migration of server, storage, and networking systems. The list of companies with the required skills was very short; Logicalis was at the top.

Comprehensive Evaluation

The first step was a comprehensive evaluation of the existing Valassis IT infrastructure including physical facilities, power, and cooling, as well as the computing environment. The evaluation was an opportunity to inventory all of the loose ends associated with the infrastructure, and develop a requirements list that

provided for present and future needs, as well as a set of best practices. This would ensure that the new-generation data center would be an efficient, dynamic environment that could evolve as Valassis's needs changed.

One striking and immediate need was the in-sourcing of a data center that Valassis had acquired in its acquisition of ADVO, the largest direct mail organization in the US. The data center that ran ADVO's entire operation had been outsourced to IBM's Southbury, Connecticut data center facility.

The primary data center for Valassis was located in what had been a ticketing facility for a major airline in Livonia, Michigan. Valassis turned to Logicalis to help expand this facility to house a centralized data center that would accommodate all of the company's IT needs, including the more than 90 major applications that were operated for ADVO by IBM.

So much new equipment was required for the Livonia data center that Valassis Director of IT Debbie Monahan says there were traffic jams some nights in the parking lot as delivery trucks queued up with the necessary hardware.

Migration of Data

The scope of the data center transformation required teams of project managers who scheduled everything within hour increments. The entire undertaking was charged with a certain drama as the migration of the data from the ADVO data center approached.

"This was a bet-your-business project," says Valassis Chief Architect Bill Demsky. "Before we committed to it, our CIO and Vice President of Technology Darrell Ward and I sat down with Logicalis CEO Terry Flood to make sure we were all on the same

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Debbie Monahan, Director of IT, Valassis

page and to map out exactly what our escalation strategy was. At one point, we looked at each other and said, ‘Yeah, we’re going to do this.’”

The migration strategy was to treat the transfer of data and applications like a total disaster recovery exercise. All of the data and applications would be downloaded to tape at IBM’s facility in Southbury, flown to Livonia, and restored on the new equipment at the expanded data center.

It was an innovative and conceptually simple idea, but everyone involved had enough experience to know that actually executing it would pose many challenges. Three major tests were planned to make the final migration as predictable and uneventful as possible.

The backups consisted of a complex array of critical data that was phased differently, and in some cases, took days to accomplish. Logistical challenges heightened the tension as the weekend of the migration approached.

Countless adjustments had to be made. For example, the company had planned to change all of the network addresses during the tests to eliminate the possibility that test data would find its way into operations. That plan proved to be too complex, however, so a very carefully designed firewall had to be put in place to avoid contamination.

Rigorous Tests

Because the scope of the project was so vast, everyone knew there would be challenges along the way. To ensure everyone was prepared for every contingency, the team designed a series of three rigorous tests before the actual migration. There were some “soul-searching moments” along the way, Demsky recalls, but by the third test, they knew every detail of every backup and every procedure intimately.

Accomplishing the migration meant essentially transplanting the nervous system for what amounted to half of Valassis’s entire IT operations over the course of one three-day weekend. “The business side had given us 72 hours to accomplish everything,” Demsky says. “It made for an interesting weekend,” he adds with significant understatement. “We put in a lot of contingency plans, and from what I recall, we used every one of them.”

Valassis’s Monahan had spent the previous six months hiring staff and getting ready to operate the ADVO IT systems as soon as they came online. She says the atmosphere in the Livonia data center during the migration weekend took on the feel of a war room. Whether the employees worked for Logicalis or Valassis, everyone there was on the same team.

“It was an incredible experience,” she says. “Logicalis techs were tag teaming each other, watching restores go, reacting to issues.” Hours went by. Crises were averted. Awards were given out that said things like: ‘Sleep is for the weak.’”

“Logicalis was a full-fledged partner,” says Demsky. “Their technical folks were working next to our technical folks. Their project management people were working next to our project management people. They were taking the good shifts and the bad shifts. In cases where we didn’t have the experience, they were showing us how to do it.”

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that when Monday morning came around, computer monitors lit up across the Valassis corporate network, and business went on as usual—except better.

Valassis Chairman, President, and CEO Alan F. Schultz summed up the result of the migration in-sourcing in a quarterly statement this way: “We expect to begin realizing annualized cost savings of approximately \$4.5 million in the fourth quarter of 2008.”

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Bill Demsky, Chief Architect, Valassis

There is more to be done. Some ADVO systems, for example, are currently being managed by Logicalis while Valassis IT is evaluating how best to integrate them into its total IT environment.

In the meantime, the newly consolidated Valassis data center is a totally re-engineered, redesigned dynamic environment that is centralized, secure, reliable, and efficient to operate and maintain.

Valassis also has one other major asset that it counts among its IT resources: “We pride our-selves as a corporation on building lasting relationships,” Demsky says. “We’re always looking for people who know where we are going and understand what our goals are and are confident enough to be able to tell us, ‘We don’t think you’re going in the right direction. Have you considered this or that?’ Logicalis is a great example of that kind of partner.”

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Logicalis Group employs over 1,900 people worldwide, including highly trained service specialists who design, specify, deploy and manage complex ICT infrastructures to meet the needs of over 5,000 corporate and public sector customers. To achieve this, Logicalis maintains strong partnerships with technology leaders such as Cisco, HP, IBM and Microsoft.

The Logicalis Group has annualized revenues of \$1 billion, from operations in the UK, US, Germany, South America and Asia Pacific, and is fast establishing itself as one of the leading IT and Communications solution integrators, specializing in the areas of advanced technologies and services.

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