RETAIL THERAPY

DETERMINED TO DERIVE THE MAXIMUM VALUE FROM THE DATA COMING INTO ITS ORGANISATION, RETAIL FIRM MARKA KNEW ITS IT SYSTEMS NEEDED TO BE PERFORMING AT THEIR BEST. CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER SALAH KANAAN ENLISTED THINK SS TO BOOST MARKA'S INFRASTRUCTURE.

Salah Kanaan, Chief technology officer, Marka

Marka is the UAE's first publicly traded retail operator focusing exclusively on fashion, hospitality and sports segments. Incorporated with a capital of AED 500 million and headquartered in Dubai, the company targets the mid-to-high-range and luxury segments, and since incorporation in 2014, has partnered with leading global brands in the retail and hospitality sectors. The company is currently pursuing a growth strategy focused on acquisitions, franchise agreements and homegrown retail concepts.

"Marka is committed to offering value to its customers through high quality products and services at optimum cost, simultaneously generating value for its shareholders and giving back to the communities in which it operates," says company chief technology officer Salah Kanaan. "In order to achieve these objectives, it's imperative that we deliver the best possible technology services at our back-end to get the most out of our operations."

Over time, Kanaan's vision of the how technology can impact the retail industry has evolved, and he now believes one crucial aspect holds the key to success. "The importance of information technology in retail stems from the importance of data," he says. "Data is nothing but information that aids decision making." He goes on to add, however, that if this facet can be manipulated correctly, huge opportunities await for its custodians. "The right data, in the right form, to the right set of people at the right time, is one of the greatest tools in the hands of the retailer. Information is at its most powerful in a particular time frame, and that has to be exploited."

Behind the scenes, Kanaan also believes that IT can deliver smooth operations for a retail organisation, which in turn has a positive impact on customer experience. "The use of information technology serves as a basis for integrating the functioning of various departments," he says. "When a retailer decides to use the power of technology to aid business, the investment in terms of money is usually high. However, the benefits of the use of information technology are many. As processes become automated, the time involved in particular tasks is reduced."

With Marka's senior management defining goals to adopt "state-of-the-art" technology, Kanaan and his team enlisted the assistance of Think SS to give a boost to its systems performance. "The world today runs on various information systems and ERP types," Kanaan says. "Information systems functionality is increasingly becoming a necessity, and not an option. Any fault in the software can lead to significant losses in revenue. Thus, robustness and security of the system are equally important to ensure system confidentiality, integrity and availability."

As with any transformative technology project, Kanaan was always sure to undertake his due diligence before the changes. "The two main challenges facing today's information systems are operational and technical challenges," he says. "These challenges must be addressed from the very beginning to ensure software projects do not fail."

He goes on to add that alleviating risk was crucial. "Having the adequate skills at our disposal is of course a concern in the event of nasty surprises," he says. "We are extremely committed to concise prior planning, but some things cannot be accounted for, and that always has to be considered."

Kanaan and Marka opted to employ Think SS's expertise and services in deploying Dell's converged data centre functionality and performance, which integrates servers, storage, networking and management in a single, compact chassis. This would feature office-optimised dimensions and acoustics, power requirements, and data protection and security features.

Another key addition to Marka's infrastructure would be Fortinet's high-performance network security platform which has would provide solutions for the core, edge and access layers. A new disaster recovery solution was also installed.

Following the enhancements to Marka's infrastructure, Kanaan and the company's senior management have noticed an increase in the speed of its operations, and are satisfied with the performance and availability of the new systems. The piece of mind offered by the security enhancements eased the burden on Marka's security operations, meanwhile.

Kanaan speaks very highly of the support received from Think SS, saying they have provided consistent support for a considerable time period. "Over the years, the team has provided me the huge benefit of their full dedication and expertise," he says. "I appreciate their outstanding customer service that their staff provide to meet customer expectations." Kanaan goes on to add that the level of post-sales support was exemplary, and that Think SS provided an admirable level of integrity in their work. "Their staff were very knowledgeable, and seemed genuinely interested in supporting rather than just being focused on making a quick sale."

> "THE RIGHT DATA, IN THE RIGHT FORM, TO THE RIGHT SET OF PEOPLE AT THE RIGHT TIME, IS ONE OF THE GREATEST TOOLS IN THE HANDS OF THE RETAILER."