

# Growing Foreign Exchange Player Goes for Windows Grid

Like increasing numbers of other financial firms throughout the globe, Edinburgh, Scotland-based Xchange Business has turned to a Windows-based grid computer system as an alternative to a mainframe for scaling its business outward and upward.

**Why? Economics is the most compelling driver, according to officials of this major player in the international foreign currency exchange and money transfer markets.**

“We don’t have to expend huge amounts. That’s really our main reason for using the grid,” acknowledges Xchange Business CEO Mark McElney. “But the scalability is a beautiful thing, too. We can go just about anywhere in the world we want to now.”



**Xchange Business CEO Mark McElney says the company decided to switch to a Windows-based grid computer system because of its low cost and scalability.**

In the middle of last year, Xchange Business started the move from a DOS-based system to a grid-based system. The new system, which Xchange Business is dubbing No1 FX, was developed by Glasgow, Scotland-based Corporate Modelling.

While mainframes can also allow for scalability, they just don’t make sense from a financial perspective, according to Stephen Whitelaw, who oversees sales and marketing at Corporate Modelling.

“Mainframes cost a fortune,” Whitelaw says pointing out that the extra computing capacity that companies pay for really isn’t used. Businesses that rely on mainframes also require staffing from expensive Cobol programmers, he adds.

Windows-based grids, on the other hand, provide the financial and architectural flexibility to grow along with the customer. Xchange Business for its part has already opened more than 230 exchange bureau “outlets,” or local branches, in the UK, and is currently expanding at the rate of several more each week.

“It will be easy for us to add more capabilities to No1 FX whenever we need to do so,” predicts Norman Mitchell, information technology (IT) director for Xchange Business.

Currently, customers can visit either corporate headquarters in Edinburgh or any of the local bureau outlets in the UK – which are also branded No1 FX, in honor of the grid – to exchange British pounds for US dollars, European euros, and other world currencies.

In Edinburgh, customers are also able to make treasury payments, or money transfers, in other national currencies to individuals abroad.

Although most customers are companies, Xchange Business also services individuals buying real estate or automobiles, for instance, from sellers worldwide. Each local branch is outfitted with a Dell PC for doing business locally and a double-encrypted connection for securely communicating with the grid, which is hosted in an outside data center.

The grid currently consists of six quad-processor servers, or “nodes.” Two of these servers are used for operating a Microsoft SQL Server cluster, while the other two run Microsoft Compute Cluster 2003, SharePoint Portal Server, and special software from Corporate Modelling for allocating and carving up computing tasks among processors within the grid.

Mitchell also pointed to a number of other advantages associated with the grid. For one thing, Xchange Business now has access to a full range of back-end reporting functions that simply didn’t exist with the old DOS system.

Meanwhile, the new system provides first-time automation of processes used in “stock ordering,” or placing requests to banks for denominations of currencies. “In our line of work, ‘stocks’ refer to ‘currencies,’” he explains. The grid also is fully redundant across all of its functions – and in the event that one system goes down, processes will automatically failover to other computing capabilities within the clusters. At the exchange bureau branches, the local PCs also run Microsoft SQL Express, which is able to store messages in its message queue for later retrieval in case an Internet link ever goes down.

“That way, the outlets will be able to carry on with ‘business as usual’ if that ever happens,” says Mitchell.

Before the implementation could go live, PCs at all of the local branches needed to be configured with unique port addresses to enable Xchange Business to track the messages sent between local SQL Express implementations and the SQL Server cluster in the data center. While the deployment team could remotely configure some of the computers, their presence was required at some locations.

Still, as Xchange Business’ McElney sees it, the rollout proceeded smoothly and quickly. The implementation was successfully completed over a six-month period ending December 2007.

“Now, we will be further developing the system by integrating treasury payments into the grid,” according to the CEO. McElney foresees international expansion as well. Although there’s some possibility of adding branches outside of the UK, initial expansion will take place over the Web.

On a technical level, this effort will call for integrating the Microsoft Navision accounting system now running on a PC at headquarters with the firm’s Internet-enabled No1 FX grid system, Mitchell says.

When the expanded Web-based treasury system is ultimately put in place, customers outside of the UK will also be able to conveniently make payments across national borders – in currencies of their choosing.

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