Sizing IT UP

An initially small task at Kale Consultants saw MIEL e-Security overcome challenges and execute a more complex project

By Yogesh Gupta Illustration by Unnikrishnan AV

KALE CONSULTANTS, a competent solutions provider to the global Airline, Logistics and Travel (ALT) industry, was faced with a daunting business challenge in 2008. A 30% data increase YoY in KPO operations resulted in an urgent need for data backup architecture, says Mahesh Shah, Executive Vice President, Kale Consultants. The company delivers products through license-based, outsourced or hosted media. With a dedicated focus on developing solutions for travel and transportation cus-

tomers globally, data backup and DR became very sensitive, he adds.

FOR A PIECE OF THE PIE
The project kicked off with a requirement for competent backup software. With a relatively large enterprise-like setup, Kale Consultants became a desirable account for leading vendors directly, or through large SIs. With every vendor vying to be the customer's long term strategic partner, this led to a 'price dropping' strategy. Mahesh Shah says, "A multi-vendor scenario is always beneficial for both sides to

get a true picture. We shared our commercial pain points for the vendor to rework their payment terms and offer the best priced solution."

From 2006, MIEL e-Security had a minuscule footprint with Kale Consultants executing 'bits and pieces' of their security infrastructure like ISO, Vulnerability assessment etc. "It was an open enquiry where vendors were invited to execute successful POCs", says Anuj Gupta, Director, MIEL e-Security. "At the end of 2008, the recession further shrunk the customer's budget. IT budgets suddenly reduced

Case File

Key parties: Kale Consultants, MIEL e-Security, Symantec, EMC, NetApp, Tandberg, VMWare, Fortinet

Locations: Mumbai, Thane, Pune

Project Cost: Rs 1 crore

Implementation time: 1 year

Major Technologies: Data Backup, Storage, Server Consolidation, Security Solutions

Key Activities: Site Analysis, Security, SI, Post sales support

Post Implementation ROI: Data Protection, Reduced Risk of Data loss, Less TCO & Operations Costs

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apart from becoming skeptical about spending his dollars," says Amit Vyas, Business Manager, Availability & Storage Solutions, MIEL e-Security.

The customer looked for a competent solution provider who would own this deployment and make it work across platforms. We evaluated a number of vendors but no one reflected the confidence to execute the project, recalls Shah. We shared the previous failure and made it crystal clear to them – make it happen and take the payments", he says.

THE FIRST HURDLE
Kale Consultants demanded a reasonably in depth POC. From mid 2008, MIEL engaged with the client through a POC on Symantec Net Backup. The demand for end-to-end availability across different technologies meant the need for standardization of IT architecture. Vyas says, "We worked

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to a mere 30% of the initial funds allocated. For 6 months, the price dropping was bizarre," says Gupta.

ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY
In 2007, another vendor implemented a backup solution at Kale Consultants. This 'not too successful' engagement took a relatively long time for final product assessment, recalls Shah. The key requirement remained the capability of the backup solution to shrink the data and effectively backup across Oracle and SQL platforms. That backup solution did not support Oracle, he says. "Initially, there was a doubt

whether the customer would really go ahead with the project after POC due to the previous time's results. A cautious customer has high expectations

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MAHESH SHAH, EXECUTIVE VP, KALE CONSULTANTS

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closely with the customer's IT team to gather and process information regarding their setup, solutions, working on the SI plans and checking compatibilities." In a complex IT environment (OS, Server Hardware, Applications, Storage, Network); issues like down times, policies of compliance, became crucial," says Vyas.

Within the first month of the project, MIEL realized that it was a typical enterprise environment with product limitations and technology challenges. "A POC in a smaller environment is different than the demanding environment of a real infrastructure," says Gupta. The heterogeneous environment with incumbent policies along with a fast growing IT project infused the need to rebuild the entire infrastructure. This meant a chance to emerge as a holistic solution provider, he says.

THE CHALLENGES CONTINUE

Kale Consultants was undergoing an IT consolidation phase across four locations in 2007– 08. "While interacting with the airline transaction business, there was no scope for any downtime or goof up. They wanted a scalable project which encompassed 'Enterprise product solutions at SMB prices'," says Gupta. Complexities like interoperability, availability, security and related technical challenges multiplied, as the customer kept adding solutions across storage, firewall etc, says Vyas.

For the first two orders, MIEL gave flexible payment terms to win the customer's confidence. "Half way through the project, the recession receded and Kale Consultants sensed business benefits in investing in technology architecture through us," says Gupta.

FROM SMALL TO BIG

During POC at the Mumbai office, the MIEL team was engaged with studying the 'backup and restore' environment. The customer was experiencing a loss of nearly 900 hrs of downtime a year due to repeated reboots in their Linux architecture. "We did an application tuning through JBoss – an open source utility by Red Hat which solved the problem to a great extent. This goodwill gesture gave us confidence and instilled faith in the customer," recalls

'THE TECH TEAM LED FROM THE FRONT'

DURING the pre-sales project phase at Kale Consultants, MIEL delivered numerous technical presentations and alterations during the technical design, feasibility study, and deployment planning. "This was to ensure our supremacy in the final round while competing against most vendors from the industry," says Anuj Gupta, Director, MIEL E-Security. A clincher for the project's success at Kale Consultants, according to Gupta was a rather diverse approach. "We took an initiative to let our technical team lead from the front," he adds.

With a robust technology background, Amit Vyas, Business Manager, Availability & Storage Solutions, MIEL e-Security was instrumental as the 'front face' for this project. Be it technology, vendor or commercial meetings, Vyas took the lead. The customer gained confidence as most queries were instantly answered reflecting MIEL's technical expertise. "The customer was cautious from the prior 'not too successful' deployment, but had a full-fledged technology roadmap. My job role was to speak the roadmap language and not sales pitch," says Vyas.

Mahesh Shah, Executive Vice President, Kale Consultants agrees, "Sales people usually sell what they have in their portfolio without realizing customer pain points. Being from tech pre-sales, Vyas understood, translated and mapped our project requirement in an enhanced way."

"There were small issues like delivery delays, and system expectation from both sides, but that did not stop us from talking to each other. We could resolve issues faster speaking directly to technical team at the forefront," says Shah.

"This was not a planned move as our sales team usually manages relationship accounts for most projects. Except initial deals, the technical team of MIEL interfaced the customer most of the time during this project. MIEL has now replicated this model for half-a-dozen of its deals, wherein they would keep the sales guy in the background. The technical team driven by Amit Vyas would interact more often with end customers," says Gupta.

Vyas. This helped MIEL engage more with their storage environment. The customer then exposed the infrastructure to us, requesting a technology roadmap for three years, says Gupta.

A high level of post-sales commitment was expected and MIEL were asked to submit their Opex plan for the next two years to adapt to the dynamic business requirements. "Opex costs had to be frozen, including renewals till 2011," says

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> **ANUJ GUPTA,** DIRECTOR, MIEL E-SECURITY

Gupta. "When they succeeded with a backup solution, MIEL became more than a 'one off' transactional vendor. DR storage capacity planning was extended as we involved MIEL with data security, storage and solutions around it, says Shah.

WORTH THE EFFORTS

The project was executed in two phases across 12 months in 2009. From a backup perspective, the time window was less than customer expectation. Also, data reliability is a lot higher, agrees Shah. The roadmap ahead includes creation of near online DR and migration from tape to disk- based backup. With laptop proliferation, security through employee machines is a concern area," foresees Shah.

"MIEL is a medium-growing, agile and listening organization which reacts quickly to customer pain points." What started as a small data backup solution grew to almost ten times the order. The key learning here was to never underestimate the customer's requirement," sums up Gupta. ■