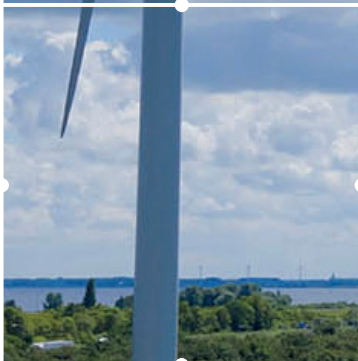÷ Solvinity
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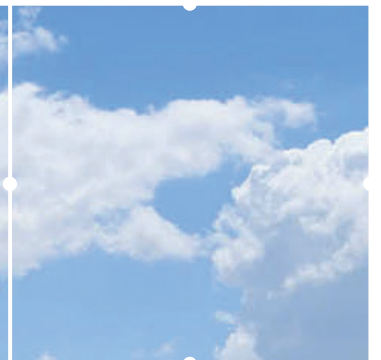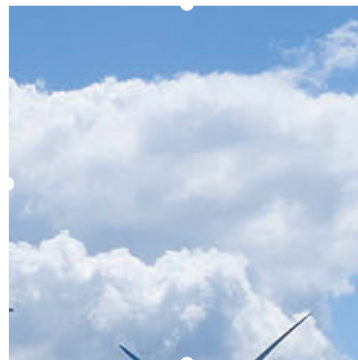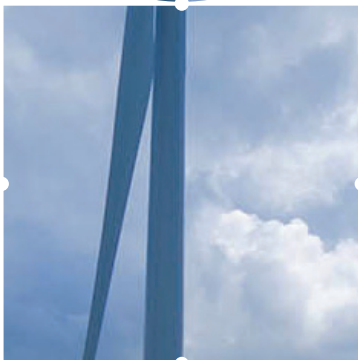
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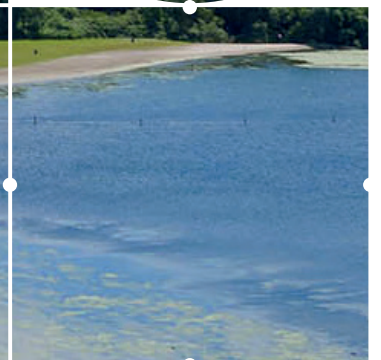
Qurrent: moving from energy supplier to data company

A company designed to sell less and less, but which must achieve growth nevertheless. This obviously flouts all economic laws, but it remains the goal of energy supplier Qurrent. In order to contribute to the sustainability of the energy market, the company wants to increase its customer base to 500,000 in the coming years, something that will only be possible if its underlying systems grow with the same pace. "Rapid growth means stricter infrastructure requirements," says Qurrent's director Denis Slieker.

"I think that the degree of alignment and communication with Solvinity is excellent. They treat clients with care, and give us the attention we need."

Denis Slieker, director of Qurrent

Qurrent's people are on a mission. They sell energy, but would prefer to keep this activity to a minimum and instead inform their customers about saving energy, insulation, and how to generate power independently. Qurrent is also trying to involve customers in new projects, such as building wind and solar farms. In this mission, the company now stands at an important crossroads in its development: the green advance guard of the population, meaning the early adopters of green energy, are already customers of Qurrent or other green energy initiatives. What is now important is to convince the rest of society about the need for clean energy.

Qurrent's aim is to grow: from a niche player, to mainstream supplier. The current number of 125,000 customers must quadruple over the next four years,

which is one of the reasons that Qurrent will be the main sponsor of Feyenoord next season. However, it is equally or more important that internal processes are optimised. In the coming years, Qurrent will be focusing on innovation, business intelligence and operational excellence.

The company is collecting data via the Qbox, its smart energy monitor, and wants to use this data to better advise and serve customers. At the same time, Qurrent is aiming to set up its business as efficiently and as intelligently as possible in the highly competitive energy market. Since Qurrent does not consider the management of the IT systems that make this possible a core task, it sought a partner that could help achieve both goals.

About Qurrent

Qurrent is a 100% subsidiary of the DOEN Foundation. In 2011, the Postcode Lottery (Postcodeloterij) Foundation was awarded the funds to build an organisation that would accelerate the energy transition in the consumer market. That organisation became Qurrent. It started life as a supplier of the Qbox, a small box that allows consumers and businesses to monitor their energy consumption. Qurrent has also been an energy supplier since 2013. Director Denis Slieker: "If we want to stimulate people to save energy and generate power themselves, we cannot stay on the sidelines as advisors." Qurrent currently employs 80 staff and has 125,000 customers. In 2016, Qurrent was chosen as the greenest energy supplier in the Netherlands for the third year in a row.

What was the challenge?

For a company with green targets, energy is a paradoxical product; if more is sold, it is good for the supplier's cash flow, but not for the environment. Qurrent therefore decided that earning from energy sales would push the company in the wrong direction. Instead, the company sells electricity and gas at cost price, and only makes profit on the standing charges paid by each consumer, regardless of the supplier. Denis Slieker continues: "Since our income is relatively low, it's important that the company is hyper-efficient and maximises the use of automation processes. That's the only way we can continue our operations."

Although Qurrent's model is scalable, it is important at this stage in its growth that its processes are also future-proof. Until recently, its IT systems were managed by a small firm. Qurrent was growing too rapidly for this supplier, which could not keep pace and risked compromising growth. With various failures every year, some of which were serious, the board decided that the downtime was simply too high for a professional organisation. In principle, IT services must always be available.

Moreover, the company is moving further and further from being an energy supplier and is becoming a data factory. Data analysis is a hot item for the power company. The Qboxes deliver an incredible amount of data, and this data is begging for analysis. "We're looking at whether we can predict when customers are going to contact us," says Slieker. "And which customers are interested in saving energy, or even generating their own. In this way, we aim to better understand the customer, so that we can make each customer personalised offers. That's a technical area, because if we analysed these requests, the system would slow down." Qurrent sought a partner who could better prepare the company for the high but irregular demand for computing power that characterises Big Data initiatives.

The objectives

- Focus on core tasks and innovation by outsourcing IT management
- High availability: reduce downtime
- Digital Transformation: Prepare IT infrastructure for growth, flexibility, and new, digital, data-driven BI initiatives

How was the cooperation?

"It's all very well saying we're an energy supplier, but IT is becoming increasingly important," says Alexander van Meeuwen, IT manager at Qurrent. "In Solvinity, we have found a partner who helps us strategically. Solvinity itself is very innovative, and knows that data and customer data are important topics for us. If there are any developments around data warehousing or business intelligence, they let us know proactively."

The cooperation is different from that which was first envisaged by Qurrent. Initially, the company thought it would be enough to have an 'order picker': a supplier who sets up its product, and then leaves. At the start of the search for a new partner, Qurrent first asked an external consultant to draw up a list of requirements and wishes. Then, a large number of companies were invited to present their plans for the energy company. Slieker: "Solvinity was flexible enough to put themselves in the shoes of our small company, yet big and solid enough to safeguard quality."

Initially, Qurrent requested a hosting solution. The company has a number of proprietary applications, and a number of applications from different suppliers. The company wanted to optimise the interaction between these apps, so that it would be easier to exchange data, and there was also room for performance improvements. "During the talks with potential partners, we left open the issue of whether the new solutions should be completely cloud-based. The companies we spoke with had to come up with their own vision of the best solution. Some proposed a complete hardware solution, others wanted to use the cloud, while a third group, including Solvinity, introduced a hybrid model." The clarity of Solvinity's documents was also praised. Slieker: "What the companies were selling had to be clear. I gave up on some documents after a couple of paragraphs, because I couldn't understand what they were on about."

In the solution proposed by Solvinity, Qurrent has virtually no involvement anymore with the management of its IT systems. All applications run at Solvinity. "Solvinity is very proactive with solutions and ideas. They also realise that someone must be a client for at least a year before any profit can be made, and they give us their own ideas about efficient operation and retention. The smarter we can handle data, the better. Solvinity realises this too, and the company really contributes with its ideas in this respect."

The operational IT management team is at Solvinity, and not physically present at Qurrent. Van Meeuwen: "We can also communicate well with the team. We regularly give presentations about where we stand, so that the Solvinity team becomes increasingly involved in our business. It's also an opportunity for us to ask questions. Knowledge sharing and getting to know each other is important."

Slieker considers the cooperation to be very pleasant. "I think that the degree of alignment and communication with Solvinity is excellent. We had to get used to each other in the workplace, but thanks to regular consultations, everybody understands each other well. Everything is open to discussion. They treat their clients with care, and give us the attention we need."

The solution

- Complete outsourcing of IT management to Solvinity
- Transfer of entire IT environment, including self-built systems such as the order processing program, to a private environment in the Solvinity Cloud (including redundancy and high availability)
- High availability: always available thanks to redundant infrastructure, storage and computer platforms
- Partial migration to Windows Azure Pack: prepared for a future hybrid combination with public Azure cloud solutions to enable new IoT and BI initiatives
- Cloud workshops by Solvinity to identify which new SaaS and PaaS services would best enhance Qurrent's business
- Support Qurrent's CSR sustainability goal by using the Cloud and Solvinity's ISO14001 certification

What has it accomplished?

In addition to a smooth-running platform, the cooperation with Solvinity is providing the company with a lot of insight. The switch to a large supplier that documents and records everything in protocols was good for Qurrent, emphasises Slieker, as it ensures clarity and quality. "We behave as if we were a start-up. What we invent today has to be up and running tomorrow. It's an area in which we are understanding each other more and more. Give and take, test the water, get to know each other; we've learned that we need to plan our business, instead of our old habit of following our noses."

Qurrent has learned to communicate, according to Slieker and Van Meeuwen, a process needed at all stages and levels. Slieker: "If you don't communicate, you are left relying on your own assumptions. That's when things go wrong." The company is becoming more involved in the network organisation, an area in which it intends to cooperate closely with partners. To this end, shared goals are defined with Solvinity, such as scalability, the stability of customer growth, and the quality of uptime.

Now that the partners are all on the same page, it's time to look towards the future. For example, Qurrent wants to work with Continuous Deployment, where ongoing developments and improvements can be implemented immediately. Continuous Integration and Continuous Delivery (CI/CD) are important challenges for companies where development occurs in-house and operations are outsourced, such as Qurrent. For such situations, Solvinity developed its own methodology, called Integrated Delivery. This model developed by Solvinity stimulates a dialogue between developers and operations to accelerate delivery, in addition to ensuring that the final solution is as safe and scalable as the customer was anticipating. The Integrated Delivery model results in a better and more effective development organisation, which is able to deliver the software that ultimately helps the business make money.

The results

- Thanks to the more professional platform, Qurrent now experiences significantly less downtime. Instead of the previous situation, in which there were several failures every month, uptime is now almost 100%.
- Windows Azure Pack means that Qurrent is no prepared for new IoT and Big Data initiatives, and able to take advantage of the high flexibility and scalability of the public cloud.
- Technological improvements mean faster customer service. The outdated databases were redesigned; their more efficient layout allows employees to search much faster, and performance has been optimised. Since Solvinity started, Qurrent's customer base has doubled. Thanks to the built-in scalability, there have been no problems in serving this new group.
- With Solvinity, both internal and external communication have improved considerably. Consultations are held at both strategic/tactical and operational levels. Regular consultations on strategy are held once a quarter, while the engineering teams are in daily contact.
- Optimal collaboration between development (Qurrent) and operations (Solvinity) thanks to Integrated Delivery.
- The Qurrent environment is hosted on the Solvinity Private Cloud Platform. In addition to regular hosting features, the IIS/.Net sites and SQL databases are hosted on Solvinity's Windows Azure Pack (WAP). WAP allows Qurrent to create its own sites and databases. A transition from WAP to Azure (Public Cloud) will eventually be possible, if it transpires that this would provide additional benefits to Qurrent. Solvinity and Qurrent are collaborating in workshops that are to support a new foundation for Qurrent's growth.

Lessons learned

Intensive projects like this one, which have a major impact on an organisation, always provide insights into how colleagues in a similar position can benefit. For example, Qurrent's director Denis Slieker strongly recommends documenting all information about self-built systems in advance. "That makes things much more pleasant and saves time if a new IT partner is brought on board."

Another tip is to make sure that there is a dedicated project manager from day one to streamline communications. "Initially, Qurrent ignored this piece of advice, which delayed the process," believes Slieker. To streamline the process, Solvinity proposed communication on three levels: an annual consultation with the boards, a quarterly meeting on strategy, and daily contact on development and ongoing issues.

Since Solvinity began working with Qurrent, its customer base has doubled, while the availability of the databases and the performance of the systems have steadily increased. That is the benefit of scale that Solvinity has been able to offer. Qurrent wanted to optimise existing systems while adding new services, and these challenges were solved through careful consultations and by going through all the processes step by step.

Both parties emphasise that it is very important to visit each other regularly; to get to know each other's cultures and to recognise the customer's underlying questions. For example, the teams took part in a joint cooking workshop to break the ice, which laid a solid foundation for the rest of the relationship.

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About Solvinity

Solvinity develops innovative client-orientated solutions, and provides companies with high security demands secure access to the private, public and hybrid cloud. Solvinity specialises in cloud services for managed hosting, analytics, workplace and security. The company is an expert in hosting critical infrastructures. Under the motto "Secure and compliant by design", Solvinity is certified according to international and Dutch standards such as ISO27001, ISO14001, ISAE3402 type II, SOC2 and NEN7510. Every year, the company participates in the Giarte Outsourcing Performance study, in which it has scored above 90% for many years. Clients are very impressed by the company's communications, and appreciate that the company not only listens to feedback, but actually does something with it. Solvinity's clients include the Dutch national government, municipalities, TNO, Trans Link Systems (public transportation smart card), ING Bank, Nationale Nederlanden, Rabobank, Ahold, Aegon and ICS Cards. Its annual turnover in 2016 was €38.5 million. The company has more than 200 employees in the Netherlands. For more information, visit www.solvinity.com, or follow Solvinity on Twitter and LinkedIn.

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