

Ladbrokes bets on Informix to support its fast-growth business



Overview

■ The Challenge

Ladbrokes had developed a highly successful multi-channel betting service. A single user account is used for online, telephone and in-store betting and gaming. New services and new markets, principally in Europe and Asia, required a significant increase in capacity.

■ The Solution

Working with ArdentA (www.ardenta.com), an IBM Premier Business Partner, Ladbrokes extended its IT environment to handle the increased capacity, increasing the size of its licensed IBM Informix Dynamic Server database installation by nearly 50 per cent.

■ The Benefits

Ladbrokes has a known-cost model on a four-year licensing arrangement aimed at expanding its betting and gaming businesses. New gaming and fixed-odds offers can be added to its OpenBet service, in multi-currency and multi-language format, and can be rolled out to new markets rapidly and reliably.



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Steve Maxwell
Chief Information Officer
Ladbrokes plc

Ladbrokes plc is a world-leader in betting and gaming, taking up to 10 million bets each week and £12 billion in stakes each year. The company operates in a multi-channel environment, with high-street outlets, kiosks, on-line and telephone betting all contributing to a dynamic and growing business.

When it was first set up in Gibraltar to serve the European market, the Ladbrokes.com Internet site took just £2,000 in total bets placed on the first day of operation. Thereafter, its growth was explosive. Built on Informix Dynamic Server database software and the OpenBet application from Orbis, the solution has exceeded all expectations, and now contributes some £50 million to group profits annually.

Steve Maxwell, Chief Information Officer, comments, “It became apparent that the biggest challenge for Ladbrokes.com was rapid scalability. The aim is to roll out the Internet-based business model quickly and readily to new geographies, and our principal constraint is increasing total capacity.”

Playing new games

Asia represents a big opportunity for Ladbrokes. The IT infrastructure, Informix database and OpenBet application are all in place, and the challenge is to replicate the European success in new markets. Experience from the early Gibraltar days, when changing tax regimes resulted in frequent changes of physical location, demonstrated the value of repeating the existing success and extending proven solutions.

“The OpenBet interface means that players have a single account to access all of the Ladbrokes services. With the built-in multi-lingual capabilities, it became a real possibility to reach emerging markets ahead of the competition,” says Maxwell.

Upping the stakes

Scaling the Ladbrokes system required both greater total compute power – betting on the UK’s Grand National race alone generates almost 60 per cent processor utilisation – and an increase in the total number of Informix instances. Operations throughout Europe, in Liverpool, Madrid and Rome, for example, plus worldwide sites in China and Kuala Lumpur, were reaching capacity.

Increasing the IBM Informix Dynamic Server (IDS) capacity was essential for Ladbrokes, with the aim of delivering very high performance for online transaction processing (OLTP), together with high reliability and low administration workload.

Ladbrokes turned to Ardentia, an IBM Premier Business Partner, to re-structure its current 72 Informix licences and to increase the total footprint to manage new business. The outcome was an additional 30 licences for Informix Dynamic Server, combined with the existing licences and agreed as a single package for four years, providing a known-cost business model for service expansion.

“We consulted with Ardentia when our Informix license maintenance agreement needed to be renewed.

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Ardenta is one of the UK's leading Informix specialists, with a large team of technical specialists capable of providing first-class support for IT environments of almost any size and complexity. The company has a dedicated Informix support desk that provides 24x7 customer service. Staffed by experienced database administrators, the desk can handle almost any Informix-related issue – from immediate technical problems to long-term infrastructure planning.

Ardenta has worked with Ladbrokes for a number of years on various Informix-related projects, including a large-scale upgrade from Informix Dynamic Server 7 to version 9.4. To support Ladbrokes' expansion, Ardentia helped to negotiate a highly cost-effective licensing deal with IBM.

"The Informix deal that Ardentia helped us put together was part of an organic growth strategy for our eGaming business, and every penny saved on licensing can be directed towards application development," says Steve Maxwell.

"Over the last six or seven years, we have adopted a Service Oriented Architecture approach, compartmentalising our applications into building blocks. Then, for example, if we want to implement a retail system in Italy, we take units one,

four and eight and assemble them as a retail package, using the OpenBet multi-lingual capabilities to provide it in Italian. If we have a project running a sports-book in China, then we take units two and seven, let's say, to build the relevant system."

The IBM Informix database, now running into the region of several terabytes, continues to store every transaction – from the early days in Gibraltar right through to the latest activity in the Chinese and European gaming markets.

"The ability to provide a comprehensive data set for business analysis without the requirement to archive older data gives Ladbrokes an enormous marketing advantage. Informix continues to provide exceptionally fast, reliable throughput while storing a considerable amount of user activity data. With the Informix transaction engine and the OpenBet user interface, Ladbrokes has built a simpler and quicker route to creating new business solutions."

Winning streak with Informix

Ladbrokes is currently growing its non-sports fixed-odds inventory by two to three new games a month, while Backgammon and Mah-jong are proving to be popular gaming additions. It is important for Ladbrokes to be able to introduce and scale new services quickly, to capitalise on what is often short-term popularity.

The key to success has been the single sign-on capability. Every player holds a single Ladbrokes account, managed by the Informix

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database software, providing access to each new game or fixed-odds bet as it becomes available through the OpenBet interface. Telephone bets, self-service kiosks, Internet-based games and traditional betting-office wagers are all handled by the same core Informix system, helping to simplify the business model and the administration.

Steve Maxwell reports, "While some of our competitors started by offering separate user names and passwords for each type of gaming, be it casino, sports-book or telephone betting, Ladbrokes has opted to always offer a single 'wallet' for each customer."

Ladbrokes plans to go one step further and enable customers to enhance the experience by playing out of a single wallet, with sub-wallets for poker, casino and any game they play. This service will differentiate Ladbrokes by helping players manage their accounts more easily. "The OpenBet software has helped remove any channel, language and currency barriers to our business initiatives," says Steve Maxwell.

IBM Informix will continue to form the basis for the entire online gaming platform, and Ladbrokes is planning to work with Ardentia on an upgrade to a newer version of Informix Dynamic Server in the near future – helping the company to take advantage of new features and even better performance.

Steve Maxwell concludes, "With this Informix architecture and great support from Ardentia, Ladbrokes is able to scale its systems rapidly and cost-effectively, and quickly introduce new games and services to capitalise on changing trends among our customers."

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