Ster-Kinekor Moves Production Workloads to Tintri

South African Cinema Company Obtains 2x Performance Increase and Eliminates the Need for a Dedicated Storage Admin

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Industry
- Entertainment

Geography
- Johannesburg, South Africa

Virtualization environment
- VMware vSphere 5. 5 (230 Server VMs and 200 VDI VMs across both devices T540 and T850)
- Traditional storage: Dell Compellent, EqualLogic, and MD3600 systems

VM profile
- All virtual workloads and SAP databases

Key challenges
- Inadequate performance on Dell systems
- Lacked the ability to pinpoint source of performance issues
- Difficult to allocate VM's to the right storage tier
- Warranty renewals on existing systems were far too expensive

Tintri solution
- Tintri VMstore™ T540 and T850 systems

Primary use case
- The Tintri systems are being used to support all production workloads for Ster-Kinekor's Entertainment and Theater Divisions

Business benefits
- Reduced internal reporting time from 30 minutes to 9 minutes
- Doubled SAP performance
- Eliminated the need for a dedicated storage admin
- Gained the ability to 'snap' copies of the production environment for testing in just 15 minutes

Company Information

Ster-Kinekor is South Africa's largest cinema company. With 58 state of the art cinema complexes, more than 400 screens, and 63,000 seats, the word "movies" is synonymous with the Potgieter Ster-Kinekor to most South Africans. Founded in 1969 in Johannesburg, Ster-Kinekor is a wholly owned subsidiary of South Africa's Primedia Group.

IT Challenges

Ster-Kinekor had been relying on a range of different storage technologies, including Dell Compellent, EqualLogic, and MD3600 systems to support its three VMware vSphere 5.5 environments, with 60 to 70 storage LUNs. The existing environment was experiencing significant performance issues and difficulty managing the data stores.

"We were struggling with the slow performance on our business-critical systems," said Andre Potgieter, IT executive at Ster-Kinekor. "But we were unable to determine the source of the problems in our existing 3-tier infrastructure. With no visibility across the platform, we couldn't determine if the cause of the slowdown was due to the storage, host, or network infrastructure. We had invested in some very expensive Compellent systems, but it was difficult to get the tiering right. And finally, capacity planning was also a challenge for our IT team. We were unable to easily determine how much space we had left because of the diverse storage technologies in our datacenter."

Looking for a New Solution

Potgieter was first introduced to Tintri in 2013. "Although we are a relatively small organization, we always like to check out the newest, cutting-edge business technologies," noted Potgieter. "One of the most interesting new solutions we found was from Tintri. So we asked Tintri to come to our headquarters and show us a demo of the storage system. We loved what we saw in the demo and presentation, so asked for a unit to test. From there, it was history."

www.tintri.com

Running the POC

Potgieter decided to run the test on the Entertainment Division's production systems. "We received the Tintri test system on a Friday, and by Monday we had transferred everything onto the POC unit," Potgieter reported. "I wanted to see how it operated at full load, not just on an isolated test case. So we moved our entire production environment over, including our virtualization workloads. By the following Wednesday, we were so amazed by the performance and simplicity of the Tintri environment that we purchased that test Tintri T540 system for our production environment."

Expanding to the Theater Division

In addition to managing IT for Ster-Kinekor's Entertainment Division, Potgieter recently took over all IT operations for the Theater Division. "As soon as I stepped into the Theater Division's datacenter, I could immediately see where the problems were," Potgieter said. "The IT environment was far too complex. They were struggling with unknown performance issues, most likely with either the networking infrastructure or the storage backend, but were unable to pinpoint the source of the problem. So I called Tintri, and said I needed an additional unit as fast as they could deliver it."

Faster Performance

Ster-Kinekor purchased the additional Tintri T850 system in May 2015 for the company's Theater Division. "We installed the new system on a Friday. On Monday, I received an email from one of our internal users that said, 'I don't know what you guys did this weekend, but reports that used to take 30 minutes now run in just nine minutes. One week later, our production team reported that performance had doubled in the company's SAP environment. Average response times (per dialog step) for our SAP application dropped from 640ms to 377ms."

Simplified IT Environment

Potgieter was also impressed with the simplicity of the Tintri architecture. "By deploying Tintri, we were able to get rid of all 50 data stores in VMware and we now have just one," Potgieter reported. "It's not just with the SAN, Tintri has simplified a lot of complex networking on the backend, which was the source of a lot of frustration. Deploying Tintri really simplified the networking behind the solution. The net result is faster performance from a smoother operating backend."

Reduced Management Time

The Tintri environment is much easier to manage than the previous legacy systems, according to Potgieter. Before Tintri, Ster-Kinekor had one person dedicated solely to managing the storage systems. The Tintri is so easy to work with that it can now be managed by any of the company's IT generalists. "There's not very much to learn on the Tintri platform," noted Potgieter. "The graphical interface is quite intuitive. It is easy to identify bottlenecks and check capacity on the systems. With Tintri, storage management time has gone down to almost zero. We still log in to the Tintri management interface once every two weeks, just to make sure that there is enough space left on the storage. We know it will alert us, but we check it anyway. That's the only maintenance we do on Tintri at this point."

One unexpected side benefit of the move to Tintri is the company's shorter weekly status meetings. "Storage used to be an agenda line in every IT team meeting--trying to understand if our legacy storage systems were the culprit of some sort of performance issue somewhere," noted Potgieter. "Storage is no longer a point of discussion in our weekly IT meetings. We can move on to more strategic topics now."

Quickly Creating Test Environments

Tintri is also enabling Ster-Kinekor to quickly create test environments for the company's development and QA teams. "Our SAP database is over 5TB in size," Potgieter reported. "Our CFO asked us to refresh the QA environment so they could perform some year-end testing. In our old storage environment, we couldn't just 'snap' a copy of the production environment for QA. We tried for two weeks to deliver a replica of the production environment to our QA team so they could run their tests, but we were not able to. Once we migrated SAP over to Tintri, we just clicked on the database, snapped it, and 15 minutes later our QA team was testing a full copy of our production environment."

Excellent Tintri Support

The Tintri systems have also been very reliable. "Tintri Support has been fantastic," Potgieter reported. "We haven't had any failures on the Tintri in our Entertainment Division. Now that we have another unit in our Ster-Kinekor theater environment, I am sure we will have the same experience. We did have one network failure, where we accidentally lost power on one of our switching environments. Within minutes, we received an email from Tintri saying that they noticed we lost conductivity. We assured them it was a network issue on our end, but it was nice to receive the call. That is the extent of the support we had needed from Tintri."

Support was actually a big concern for Potgieter when Ster-Kinekor switched to Tintri, since they had been relying heavily on Dell support for a long time. "We have 4-hour mission-critical response from Dell," Potgieter said. "The support I have been getting from Tintri direct has been equivalent to the Dell support—and usually much better—in every measure."

Future Plans

After moving all of Ster-Kinekor's production workloads over to the two Tintri systems, Potgieter started making plans to move the old Compellent unit to the company's disaster recovery environment. "I requested a quote from Dell to extend the warranty on the existing systems for an additional two years. But the cost of maintenance on the legacy storage platform was nearly the same price as purchasing a new Tintri System. I am now re-thinking our DR plan, and would like to put another Tintri into our disaster recovery location instead of upping the warranty on our aging Dell systems."

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