

Business agility, beyond the hype



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With a flexible, powerful technology infrastructure and a willingness to evolve, Lifescript is finding success through adaptation.

Business agility is an overplayed marketing term, a nebulous benefit for ubiquitous needs. But the importance and value of agility in the real world are anything but hype.

This is the story of Lifescript, a California-based company that has already altered its core business once—and is in the midst of another shape-shifting pivot.

Lifescript's agility isn't hearsay. Enabled by foundational technologies and big data analytics, the company has showcased a willingness to adapt and the wherewithal to transform. And it is experiencing unprecedented success as a result.

A COMPLETE BUSINESS SHIFT

Founded in 1999, Lifescript built its business selling customized vitamin plans, meal replacement shakes, and nutritional soy bars. A broker between supplement manufacturers, physician's offices, and the patients they serve, Lifescript gathered a large amount of consumer health data. And it had access to those consumers through its subscription model.

The company was sitting on a gold mine.

"We had a large subscriber base, most of whom are women, and a rich set of data about them," says Jack Hogan, co-founder and CTO of Lifescript, who adds that women represent a key demographic for pharmaceutical companies and advertisers because they often make healthcare decisions and purchases for their entire family. "So we completely shifted our business focus in 2005 to online publishing and advertising."

Lifescript couldn't make this shift without a powerful, flexible technology infrastructure. One that could deftly handle massive quantities of data and adapt to the company's changing needs. That's why the company was one of the early adopters of the Intel® Xeon® processor-based Cisco Unified Computing System™ (Cisco UCS®).

"We wanted a single, converged stack," says Hogan, "a backbone that would be extremely flexible and able to support massive growth and scale."

With the help of its converged infrastructure, Lifescript went from a vitamin plan provider to the #1 website dedicated to women's health in a few short years. And the company continues to expand and evolve.

ACQUISITIONS FUEL GROWTH, DIFFERENTIATION

Lifescript has moved well beyond its original incarnation. A daily portal for women with associated newsletters and engagement channels, it gathers a wealth of data about its subscribers. Not just health-related data, but insights about finances, relationships, sexuality, and other lifestyle metrics.

To fuel ongoing growth and carve out new market niches, Lifescript has made a number of acquisitions in recent years. New companies bring additional web properties and subscribers with them—and a lot more data to process and analyze.

"As we acquire new businesses, we need to port those properties and all of their data into our private cloud, and we need to centralize technology management so we can operate as one company," Hogan explains. "Business continuity and time-to-value are essential."

To complete its most recent acquisitions, Lifescript deployed FlashStack™ converged infrastructure. Combining Cisco compute and networking components with Pure Storage® FlashArrays, FlashStack is a powerful consolidation platform for diverse IT workloads.

"I call it my data vacuum," Hogan quips. "It's a full data center that we've physically shipped to three different places in the past year, purely to pull data into our environment. Data is our most valuable asset, so we need to make sure the data we acquire is protected, well managed, and comingled with our existing information resources."

If shipping a data center around the continent sounds crazy, imagine doing it with an extremely lean IT staff.

"None of this would be possible without the simplicity, performance, and ease of management that FlashStack provides," Hogan says. "And we've done all of it with four IT guys."

GET THE WHITE PAPER

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DOUBLING DOWN ON BIG DATA ANALYTICS

After a series of acquisitions, Lifescript now operates close to a dozen different web properties. And it can track subscriber interests and interactions across all of them using their email address as the primary identifier. With 18 million unique visitors, more than 100 million page views, and half a billion emails sent every month, there is a massive amount of data to analyze.

"We process three and a half to five terabytes of transactional data every day, and we can ingest, normalize, and analyze new data within an hour," Hogan says. "Leads cool fast, so we need to be fast."

Lifescript can also analyze the effectiveness of content, promotions, and offers—and fine-tune them accordingly—on the fly. Adjustments that used to take a week or more can now be made multiple times per day, without IT intervention.

"FlashStack has super low latency, so we don't have processing bottlenecks any more. Big batch jobs that used to take 14 hours now take four hours," Hogan notes. "Those latency improvements freed up a ton of capacity, which immediately saved us a tremendous amount of money."

The platform has also enabled Lifescript to continually evolve its business, double down on big data analytics spanning 150 million users, and deliver consumer insights with speed and precision.

Business agility may be overhyped and oversold, but don't tell that to Jack Hogan.

"Nobody else can do what we're doing," he says. "Agility is the key, and our technology backbone has been the difference—100 percent."

