



Case Study: Digital Dimension



Overview

Country: Canada

Industry: Media & Entertainment

Customer Profile

Montreal, Quebec-based Digital Dimension is a privately held, six-time Emmy Award-winning company that specializes in high-end visual effects and animation for the motion picture, broadcast and video game industries.

Business Situation

Staying on top of a multitude of iterations and production pipeline configurations while orchestrating multiple projects created a serious efficiency challenge. Digital Dimension needed a way to remain agile instead of succumbing to growth problems.

Solution

Digital Dimension created a powerful workflow solution using Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 and Nintex Workflow 2007.

Benefits

- Manages high volumes of information efficiently and accurately.
- Merges operational pipeline and administrative workflows into one portal.
- Reduces production costs.

Premier Digital Content Creation Studio Improves Operational Efficiency with Workflow Solution

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— Ben Girard, CEO/CTO, Digital Dimension

Digital Dimension, a six-time Emmy Award-winning studio specializing in high-end visual effects for the motion picture industry, was finding itself inundated with information. Digital Dimension needed a way to organize the huge volume of digital content, projects, deadlines, comments, review notes, and production materials in order to manage the complex production process. Digital Dimension used Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007 and other Windows Server System™ integrated server software to create a workflow system designed to organize and integrate all this information and present team members with just the information that they needed. As a result, Digital Dimension personnel can now stay focused on the work that needs to be done, complete tasks more quickly and efficiently, and keep clients more satisfied than ever.



“With Office SharePoint Server we created an intranet that touches and streamlines every single facet of the business. Coupled with powerful eWorkflows, it yields amazing efficiencies and measurable consistency.”

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Situation

You may have seen the visual magic of Digital Dimension without even knowing it—in action sequences in *Live Free or Die Hard*, *Get Smart*, the opening sequences of multiple Super Bowls, or in any of more than 85 films that its artists have worked on over the past 12 years. The company has won six Emmy awards and is a four-time Visual Effects Society award winner.

In 2003, Digital Dimension executives could see that the company’s success was posing a serious challenge. Interaction between Digital Dimension producers, managers, studio executives, and production companies was leading to more work—and more complex production processes—for the company’s digital artists. There was ever increasing pressure to create, review, revise, finalize, and return projects quickly.

In 2004, Digital Dimension built a collaborative workflow system to gain control over these activities and processes. Based on Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server, the K2.NET Workflow Server, and proprietary tools, Digital Dimension gained a solution that helped artists and managers share information, collaborate on projects, and manage workflows with greater efficiency. Indeed, the solution was so successful that Digital Dimension executives and artists alike soon began to want it to do even more. Over time, though, that desire for more began to push against the limits of what Digital Dimension could do with SharePoint Portal Server. To achieve the kinds of agile processes that Digital Dimension executives envisioned, to streamline the movement of content from the production side of the company to private extranet destinations where clients could review and comment upon content online, and to integrate virtually all areas of

the company—from human resources to production and accounting—using more comprehensive workflow tools, Digital Dimension needed a new solution.

Solution

To achieve its evolving goals, Digital Dimension migrated from SharePoint Portal Server and Microsoft Windows Server 2003 to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 (Office SharePoint Server) and Microsoft Windows Server 2008. It also migrated from K2.NET Enterprise Server to Nintex Workflow 2007, which integrates tightly with Office SharePoint Server. The Microsoft Office InfoPath® 2007 information-gathering program provides access to intelligent forms and Microsoft Operations Manager provides monitoring and reporting capabilities to ensure the availability and performance of the workflow system. Microsoft SQL Server® 2008 provides database support.

Digital Dimension tracks all its projects using Office SharePoint Server, which keeps up-to-date copies of all client notes and project plans, and which, with Nintex Workflow, forms the basis for its entire operational pipeline. Office SharePoint Server also holds links pointing to the production files associated with each part of each project in development. These files can be hundreds of megabytes in size and are stored in a Windows Server 2008–based network attached storage system. An artist or producer can click a link in a SharePoint site to view a project in its native application.

Using Office SharePoint Server lists and Nintex Workflow, Digital Dimension developers have built individualized digital dashboards that make it easy to see up-to-date project status information at all times. All project participants know when a project has been opened, closed, updated, or

modified in some way. As soon as an artist completes or updates some portion of a project, workflows updates the process linked to Office SharePoint Server lists—so project participants seeking current status of the project need only look at their digital dashboards to see what has been done and what remains to be done.

As artists complete steps in the production process, Nintex Workflow also interacts with Microsoft Exchange or Microsoft Windows Live™ Messenger to keep the appropriate parties up to date. At certain points—which vary from project to project—Nintex Workflow may prompt Exchange Server to send an e-mail message to the producer or artist, indicating completion of a stage in the project. The artist then knows to go to Office SharePoint Server to begin his or her portion of the project. If the task is ready for review, producers can click a link in the e-mail message and watch the process in real time on their desktop or laptop PC. Digital Dimension uses a wireless network throughout its facilities, so producers can stay informed of project progress regardless of where they are at any time.

Similarly, a project manager can present the work to the client online, eliminating the need to send tapes or DVDs back and forth during the review cycle. When a project is ready for review, Nintex Workflow automatically copies the file into a secure extranet location and sends the client an e-mail message with a link to the file. The client can click the link, log into the Office SharePoint Server–based extranet site, and review the work. They can make notes and comments through an interface on the Web site, and these notes and comments are incorporated right into the project files residing on Office SharePoint Server for the artists and producers to see.

As soon as the client has reviewed the content and provided input, the notification

capabilities built into Office SharePoint Server inform the artist and project manager and the project can move forward—and it all happens in a matter of seconds.

Benefits

The combination of Office SharePoint Server and Nintex Workflow has created an integrated solution that helps personnel throughout Digital Dimension to share information, collaborate on projects, and manage workflow with greater efficiency—which in turn enables the company to create, manage, and deliver its high-quality products more responsively and cost-effectively for clients.

Managing Information More Efficiently

“We’re more agile than ever before,” says Ben Girard, CEO and CTO of Digital Dimension. “We’re using Office SharePoint Server site templates and customized Web parts. Office SharePoint Server is very flexible, and we’ve customized it extensively. Now we can deliver an experience that is distinctly designed to support the digital content creation industry.”

The refined workflow solution has gone far beyond the common project information repository that Digital Dimension had first built. “We have workflows to develop Web sites, project structures, even the client extranet,” says Girard. “It’s all automated, thus consistent.”

Processes are more consistent than ever too. One of the challenges that Digital Dimension encountered in its earlier SharePoint Portal Server–based solution was that artists had to configure many different settings manually when sending jobs to the computing farm. “It was a process that was prone to errors,” says Girard, “and that wasted a lot of time.”

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Using the Microsoft .NET Framework, Digital Dimension developers created an interface to Office SharePoint Server that eliminates the need for manual project configuration.

“Now, when a client makes a specific production request, instead of having to modify dozens of files to accommodate this request we can simply edit an item in a SharePoint list,” says Girard, “and Office SharePoint Server configures the job automatically, based on the settings associated with that list item. That provides a huge gain in both speed and accuracy.”

Eliminating Clutter

The digital dashboards also ensure that Digital Dimension personnel are not overwhelmed with irrelevant information. A given digital artist does not need to see all projects underway, for example, so the digital dashboard presents only those projects on which that artist is working—and lets that artist know the status of each shot at a glance.

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Indeed, Girard notes that employees at many other digital content creation studios need several weeks of training before they can begin to understand the complex management systems that are supposed to help them work more effectively. With the solution Digital Dimension has created in Office SharePoint Server and Nintex Workflow, however, Girard says that new employees can be up and running much faster.

“When people get hired at some of the other major digital studios, they go through a three week training camp just to learn the

tools and the production pipeline. The pipeline is the key part, too, because it’s very complicated and they can’t afford to have a new person make a mistake that interrupts or messes up the production pipeline.

“At Digital Dimension, we’ve put so much energy into creating an easy-to-use pipeline with Office SharePoint Server that people with no experience with our pipeline can be up and running in just a few days. It’s been a very smart investment on our part.”

Reducing Production Costs

Digital Dimension also is finding a broader value in the use of tools and technologies from Microsoft. It has built its entire production environment on Windows Server System integrated server software, and that has created a coherent IT environment that has proven easy to use, integrate, and support.

“Traditionally, visual effects and animation studios have been based mainly on UNIX and Linux,” says Girard, “but the Microsoft-based environment offers enterprise grade solutions that either don’t exist or are not as tightly integrated on those platforms. Because all our business, production, and development software has either been developed by Microsoft or developed to run on the Microsoft Windows® operating system, they perfectly coexist under one roof. “The Microsoft-based environment supports every single angle of our company. Allowing us to transform information into business intelligence and visually orchestrating processes between departments, projects, and applications in real-time — key ingredients to corporate alignment.”

“Unlike competitors, we don’t have to support three different operating systems, which is a real efficiency gain and an economic advantage,” Girard goes on to

say. “There’s no doubt about that. We don’t need as much support staff, system administrators, or people who support only specific applications—and that’s efficiency.”

Girard sees that cost savings growing still more advantageous over time. Digital Dimension already runs all its business and core creative applications on servers running Windows Server 2008 or workstations running the Windows operating system. Its key compositing and rendering applications all run on Windows. Even its human resources systems are tied into Office SharePoint Server, a set of InfoPath forms, and its Web site.

“We have a SharePoint list with all our job descriptions already defined,” says Girard. “That list feeds a job openings list, so when we need to fill a position we never need to retype the description. That job openings list in turn feeds into an InfoPath form that appears on the Internet. When someone visits our Web site and wants to see whether we’re hiring, they can see what’s currently open. If they want to apply, they fill in an InfoPath form. They even have to rate their software experience on the form, and all that information goes back into Office SharePoint Server. Because they’ve rated their own skills—and people are usually quite honest because they know this is a legal document—we can look on Office SharePoint Server and see a pre-filtered pool of talent. Our HR people can just start calling the people at the top of the list. They don’t need to waste time going through a stack of resumes. It’s very efficient.”

“The fact that Office SharePoint Server and Microsoft business solutions are used in all departments enables us to focus on delivering business to our clients,” says Girard. “The servers are dynamically interacting with the desktop systems and vice versa, and all aspects of our business remain connected. The value of such a dynamic setup cannot be overstated.”

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For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Digital Dimension, visit its Web site at: www.digitaldimension.com.

For more information about Nintex, visit its Web site at: www.nintex.com.

Microsoft Media and Entertainment Practice

Microsoft Communications Sector Media and Entertainment practice provides media vertical services and supply chain companies with business and people-ready software and services to optimize their business process management throughout the media lifecycle, from advertiser/partner relationship and business management to the consumer experience and action. Microsoft's enterprise software platforms and solutions enable media supply chain players to be seamlessly, dynamically, and securely connected to any point in the media business value chain, driving agility, accuracy, and efficiency.

For more information about Microsoft Communications Sector Media and Entertainment practice, go to: www.microsoft.com/resources/mediaandentertainment/default.aspx.

Solution Overview

Microsoft Server Product Portfolio

- Microsoft Windows Server 2008
- Microsoft Exchange Server 2007
- Microsoft SQL Server™ 2008
- Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007
- Microsoft Operations Manager 2005

Hardware

- Intel-based servers