FROM LEGACY TO LEADER:
NORTHERN MICRO MAKES A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION WITH HELP FROM DELL EMC

Northern Micro's story begins in 1985, when neon bangles, stirrup pants and brick-sized cell phones were all the rage. Back then, the company was in the business of building white box computers.

By the early nineties, Northern Micro had not only corporate but also government and education-sector clients, and by this side of Y2K was selling enterprise data center solutions. Although in the ensuing years it would solidify its reputation as a premier IT solutions provider, something was happening in tech and in society that would set Northern Micro on a path to unprecedented change.

"We saw what was going on very early on," said Emily Martin, Senior Director, Enterprise Technology. "It is nothing less than a sea change. The scale, speed and impact of technological advancement is unprecedented. Naturally, the delivery of digital services has deep implications, both for solution providers like us and for organizations that rely on our expertise and vision."

"While other companies sat back, waiting to see which way the wind was blowing, we made our move. We came together and agreed to transform ourselves. However, even in this, you don't just press a button, and we had a few challenges to address."

FORK IN THE ROAD

"Our infrastructure had been built over many years," said Darren Livingston, Principal Architect. "The average age of our servers at that point was nine years, with the newest being seven. This is basically two generations old — unacceptable from an IT perspective, and certainly reaching well beyond the intended life cycle."

The leadership group at Northern Micro was quick to realize that, if it was going to continue to grow and make an impact in the face of shifting market realities, it would have to not only change but take a giant leap forward. According to Brian Williams, Enterprise Solution Specialist, Northern Micro, like any company facing such a transformation, was all legacy, with almost no standardization and an overreliance on Band-Aid fixes to the challenges it and its clients were facing.

"It was gut-check time for us," said Williams. "We ended up making a team decision not to despair of the widening gap between what we were running on server-wise and what was available but to embrace the new, to take full advantage of it."

METHODICAL APPROACH

Northern Micro was deliberate and self-aware at every phase of its transformation. Change started in the IT department. As Livingston recalls, IT made a point of treating its own company like a client, which carried with it the dual benefit of giving key stakeholders from all departments input into the changes to come and providing the department with additional first-hand experience for how it would help its clients evolve.

"Of the three OEM players we looked at, we decided that Dell EMC was best able to help us," said Livingston. "The reasons for our decision are many, but to boil it down: Dell EMC was the most genuinely interested in helping us achieve our vision. They took a personal, human approach when working with us. And they were very professional. They scored points with us from the word 'go.'"

"One of the barriers to change in organizations is the human factor, specifically the disconnect between IT resources with deep skills in legacy technologies and business resources who are seeking to extend the organization's reach into new areas. At Northern Micro, we have been very fortunate in that both our technical and business brain trusts recognized a need to transform. There was agreement that, if we were to offer our customers agile and scalable solutions going forward, we ourselves needed to change, if only to know by first-hand experience how to make that all-important leap into the digital world."

—Emily Martin

SHARED VISION

Livingston remembers telling his chief contact at Dell EMC, Ted Bechara, exactly what Northern Micro wanted in terms of technology. Livingston had originally said he wanted to go with a specific series of server. Bechara might well have nodded in agreement just to make his client happy, but he didn't. Instead, he advised Livingston to go with another series of server (the R730XD over the R630 series) which, while a touch more expensive, would better allow for growth. This, said Livingston, was one example of how Dell EMC, far from just trying to get to the end of the job, took a stake in Northern Micro's vision.

On the foundation of Dell EMC server technology, Northern Micro leveraged VMware's vRealize and VSAN technologies to manage and monitor its new software defined data center. This provided the organization with a flexible, elastic environment built for growth.

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Livingston believes Northern Micro's decision to get on the fast track to continuous improvement — and to stay there — is the best decision the company ever made. While before, IT had to rely largely on silos of individual knowledge, now, with access to deep data and comprehensive documentation, it can help its clients move forward with their own transformation as a team delivering a pool of resources for the business to consume.

"It's no longer about us or them, separately, it's about us and them, together," said Livingston. "Having documented every step of our journey, we have a repeatable process, literally at our fingertips. Pretty much everything we have gone through is documented, and thus repeatable."

"Throughout our change, we maintained a customer's mindset. The way we saw it: in the business we're in, thinking like a customer makes us better and, in turn, makes our clients better."

"Dell EMC didn't force us into a setup that in no way resembled our original vision. Quite the opposite. They did everything in their power to get us to where we knew we needed to be. There was no need to back off or water down our vision. And if we did concede a small point here and there, it was because what Dell EMC had in mind was going to be better for us in the long run."

—Darren Livingston

STANDING APART

Emily Martin declares the first phase of Northern Micro's transformation a success, and attaches great value to Dell EMC's past and ongoing contribution to its evolution.

"We have a clear vision, both on the business side and the technical side, and great synchronization between the two halves of our business," said Martin. "This is a crucial competitive differentiation, that what drives one side of our company is informed by the other side. It's rare in our industry to find that synergy, and, ultimately, it leads to better business outcomes."

EXCITING JOURNEY, BRIGHT FUTURE

"We're on a journey," said Williams. "Although we have always known our strengths, digital has freed us to more effectively deliver on these strengths. Dell EMC has been, and continues to be, a huge part of that journey for us."

"We believe hybrid cloud and on-premise cloud solutions have a great future, especially with our government clients," said Livingston. "We're going to continue to digitally evolve, both within our borders and beyond, and see where innovation takes us. One thing's for sure: we're going to stay ahead of the curve. Our clients deserve no less."

Said Martin: "Our message to our clients is that software-defined cloud offerings should be leveraged, with flexibility, security, and ongoing costs front of mind when making decisions on where to invest. Our past and continuing digital transformation has put us in an excellent position to help them safely and intelligently navigate the latest technology breakthrough so they can deliver better products, services, and business processes through digitization.

"Our amazing partner OEMs are like a team of dragons. They drive technology forward with their investments in research and development, supply chain innovation and visionary thinking. Among the partners we work with, Dell EMC has been a major leader in digital transformation. For Northern Micro to stand apart as a solution provider, we must demonstrate that we can harness the vision of dragons like Dell EMC and make it relevant for our customers and the outcomes they are driving towards. The way people work, engage and communicate evolves daily, so our customers need the agility of flexible, software-defined technology platforms. This, to me, is the true benefit of digital transformation."

—Emily Martin