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CLEAR VIEW

Juma Al Majid on course for
SDN via network visibility

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EDITORIAL



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James Dartnell
Editor

Life on the edge

Hello GCC networkers, and welcome back to our quarterly edition of Network World Middle East. In this issue we home in on some of the main areas that we believe are set to transform the region's networks in the coming months and years.

I sat down with Juma Al Majid's Ahmad Al Shami, who has been remarkably resourceful in his bid to transform the firm's network and IT infrastructure. Ahmad has deployed a number of tools and processes that are - to quote the old adage - helping the firm do more with less, as well as helping to accelerate the move to SDN. Find out how on page 14. We also take a look at some of the

most exciting, emerging trends in networks. Networking at the edge, or edge computing, has the promise of producing and analysing data locally, without the use of centralised data centres. We explore its potential on page 24.

Juma Al Majid have been remarkably resourceful in their bid to transform their network.

Schneider Electric CEO Jean-Pascal Tricoire shares his take on why networking success will be driven by the ability to innovate - easier said than done - and just how to do so on page 28. Red Hat's Oliver Horn also dives into the area that he believes will transform traditional networking - IoT gateways - both in terms of traffic and security. Turn to page 36 for more.

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CLEAR VIEW

Determined to maximise efficiency across all lines of business, Juma Al Majid Group has gone the extra mile to gain total visibility over its network, and has built a platform for innovation - and SDN - in the process.

“Without innovation, you cannot survive.”

Being resourceful with technology is Ahmad Al Shamsi's main remit, and speciality. The senior IT operations manager for Juma Al Majid - one of the UAE's oldest and best-known family businesses - knows that sometimes, the best technology solutions have simplicity at their core. "Innovation is about delivering more quality services, and, ultimately, keeping customers happier with less cost," he says. "We don't want to keep doing things in the same way, so it's important that we try out

“It's not realistic to just buy an expensive system to lift you out of a mess.”

new things to try and get different results. You need a brave heart for innovation, and you need initial failure to deliver long-term success.”

With over 10,000 employees on its books, Juma Al Majid operates across a range of industries including contracting, retail, hotels and FMCG, as well as being the exclusive distributors for Kia and Hyundai in the UAE. Established in 1950, the firm has long since cemented its place as one of the country's top family businesses.

In line with Juma Al Majid's success across a range of industries, IT complexity has inevitably resulted. Managing such a diverse group is no easy task, and "causes headaches" for Al Shamsi, who is tasked with meeting the specific technological demands of a diverse range of verticals. "The split of industries that the group manages means that you need to know what to centralise and decentralise, and how to reduce cost while sharing things in the appropriate way," he says. "In our contracting business,

for example, our SLAs need specific customisations. Across each division, IT security has different demands, while there must be efficient, transparent communications across divisions.”

Against the backdrop of diverse industries in which the company operates, Juma Al Majid has also sought ways to reinvigorate its IT infrastructure, and give the company a platform to thrive in the digital age. "In many ways, we had an obsolete infrastructure, which was very old and needed change," Al Shamsi says. "The reality, however, is that you can't overspend to completely overhaul things. Our IT skills are tied to the old infrastructures, and one of the biggest challenges is that you can't manage what you can't measure, and vice versa. As a manager, if I don't have information, I'm relying on what people know, and that isn't always enough.”

With around "120" servers as part of its current network and needing to serve 114 physical sites across the UAE, Juma Al Majid is also in the



midst of migrating a lot of its data to the cloud, and has an IT team of 35 staff to balance the day-to-day duties of IT operations, along with meeting the firm’s innovation aspirations. “I needed to find a way to manage our resources efficiently with limited budgets,” Al Shamsi says. “We needed effective measures of employee performance through the right KPIs, as well the right insights into our network that could help us to enhance security and maximise the use of our IT assets.”

Al Shamsi initially introduced ManageEngine’s ServiceDesk Plus suite of products to identify threats, enhance visibility and improve employee productivity, all via Juma Al Majid’s network. The vendor’s OpManager product was also soon added, and the results of the change have been clear to Al Shamsi. “The visibility of our network is now much improved,” he says. “It’s scary not knowing what is going in and out of your network, and it’s so important to be able to measure your assets, and to have visibility of network traffic

“You need a brave heart for innovation, and you need initial failure to deliver long-term success.”

and workloads so that you can be proactive. Whatever happens in our network, we know about it because of OpManager. It gives great visibility of our firewall, and of managing our different sites. If there is a major incident, it creates ticket and helps our employees deal with it.

“The monitoring has given us the capability to handle incidents, and resolve issues around monitoring and service desk management. Logs of network devices, the monitoring of our firewall and VPN access are key components of security handling.

A module in OpManager monitors changes in network devices and means you can compare devices to each other.”

The tools have also helped to deliver enhanced productivity and SLA completion across IT staff members, allowing Al Shamsi to observe the overlap between operations and project management. He has also been able to use the information on offer to help make project cost estimations. “We now have all processes in one place and can consolidate workloads,” he says. “The right analytics over your network give you so much information. Having advanced management monitoring really allows you to utilise your team efficiently.”

Having begun its partnership with ManageEngine in 2010, Juma Al Majid has continued to be a close partner with the firm. Work is still ongoing between the two companies to enhance visibility within Juma Al Majid’s network. “It’s been like a survivor ship to us,” Al Shamsi says. “It’s not realistic to just buy an

“It’s scary not knowing what is going in and out of your network, and it’s so important to be able to measure your assets.”

expensive system to lift you out of a mess. Whatever limitations I faced in the system could be worked around. Ultimately, I don’t need a Ferrari to get me to work, I need an efficient vehicle, and it’s great economics to spend something and get a lot in return.”

Looking ahead, Juma Al Majid is also looking to introduce a software-defined wide area networking model in the near future, in order to reduce TCO and deliver high latency for connecting to the cloud. “SD-WAN will be a very big change for us,” he says. “The most expensive thing in IT is manning. We need to reduce cost and increase value. SD-WAN increases your ability to outsource, decreases overheads and allows the team to focus more and troubleshoot the network, as well as focusing on security, auditing and supervision. SD-WAN allows us to minimise headaches and increase availability.” He adds that “in one year” Juma Al Majid’s network will be software-defined.

Al Shamsi has also overseen Juma Al Majid’s shift from MPLS to ADSL communications, a “transformation” that has seen the firm save over “AED 1.4 million”. “It’s one of most important areas to keep innovating,” Al Shamsi says.

Reflecting on the changes he has helped to introduce to Juma AL



Majid, Al Shamsi believes that one of the biggest lessons he has learned throughout various projects is the value of sound change management. “You always need culture changes and need to change old habits,” he says. “These aren’t always accepted, and people will debate how things are done. They may not share the vision or belief that you want to instil. One of the most important things you need to deliver is quick wins in order to get people on side.”

He adds that empowering staff with knowledge is equally crucial in pushing an organisation forward. “Training and education, as well as lots of communication are great,” he says.

“People get stuck in their comfort zone, and that’s human nature.

“Bad habits are similar to the analogy of the frog in boiled water. As the water gets hotter, the frog works harder to cool down, but eventually the water reaches boiling point, and it’s too late to initiate change.”

Al Shamsi also pays homage to Juma Al Majid’s senior management in the bid to introduce technological change and innovation at the company. “The commitment from top level management figures truly helps,” he says. “Our CIO wanted to introduce innovation with me on board, and his support has been fantastic in giving me the chance to make these changes.” ■