



Delivering a “Rock Star” Experience Through IT

Imagine you’ve just been hired as the Chief Information Officer (CIO) for an established company with hundreds of employees at 10 locations around the world. On your first day on the job, you’re handed a \$1 million check and issued this challenge: Rebuild every aspect of the IT environment from scratch, from the servers to the back-end applications to the PCs.

There’s just one twist: You have no IT staff, and you have seven months to complete the job.

That’s the challenge Lee Goldenberg accepted when he became CIO of menswear designer John Varvatos in May 2012. Just one month earlier, a private equity firm had acquired Varvatos from VF Corp., a global apparel and footwear giant supporting more than 30 leading brands.

This meant Goldenberg needed to quickly identify and replace the applications VF used to support Varvatos from among the more than 550 in VF’s complete IT portfolio.

“Whether you’re a customer or an employee, we’re continually asking, ‘How can we deliver the rock star experience through IT?’”

In search of self-sufficiency

“By the end of that year, we needed to be completely independent on everything from our laptops to our ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning] systems for wholesale, retail and finance,” Goldenberg says. “So we didn’t have a lot of time.”

Goldenberg knew he needed help, but his first priority wasn’t building a large IT staff. “I don’t like hiring people for a very specific skill set that I’m going to use once a month, because then I have them on payroll all the time,” he says. Instead, he and the Varvatos management team contacted Insight, which had been supporting VF’s IT operations and could help speed the migration to self-sufficiency.

“One of the reasons — not the only reason — that we chose Insight was because they already had a prior working relationship with a lot of the folks at VF that we needed to now partner with to separate the systems,” Goldenberg explains.

Fast facts

Client industry:

Designer menswear

Size of company:

250 employees in 22 retail locations worldwide

Challenge:

Rebuild the IT environment, including 19 disparate systems/applications and 2,000 styles in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, from scratch in seven months.

Solution:

- Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) environment that could support the wide variety of design tools and platforms needed at headquarters
- Creation of a custom business intelligence tool called Crossroads

Results:

- 90% of IT infrastructure migrated to the cloud within 6 months
- Reduced the number of mission-critical applications from 550 to 19
- Streamlined IT staff of 6
- Outsourced network monitoring and management to Insight’s Remote Network Operations Center

Translating vision into reality

Typically, IT executives have to perform a balancing act, continually working to develop new systems and capabilities while devoting significant resources to existing legacy IT investments.

Opportunities to create a new vision for IT support that are unencumbered by legacy infrastructure are exceedingly rare, especially for an established, multimillion dollar business like John Varvatos.

Given the unusual situation, the first order of business for Insight was to understand how aggressively Goldenberg wanted to leverage emerging trends like workforce mobility and cloud computing that were gaining real traction at the time. The vision he cast was simple: "What I wanted was the ability for our people to be able to access our systems from anywhere, at any time and on any device," he says.

Goldenberg showed no interest in building a large IT support staff either. "His goal was to have all of the day-to-day maintenance outsourced," says Reid Suko, the services account executive at Insight who serves as the primary point of contact for both VF and Varvatos, accompanied by Account Executive Brad Prenda.

A seven-year Insight veteran, Reid's job was to translate Goldenberg's vision from those initial meetings into reality. At a time when many in the IT industry were debating the value of computing in a cloud-based world, Goldenberg embraced the change.

"Lee wanted to make sure he and his team were focused on translating business needs into IT needs," Suko recalls, "rather than watching the blinking lights, chasing down carrier outages and whatnot."

Forget IT, and forget systems.

"The CIO is not going to go away, but the role is going to change," Goldenberg explains. "It's something that I have been preaching for years. Forget IT. Forget systems. Learn your business. Learn how your business runs — not just how your business runs, but how your industry works.

"In my industry, that means you have to understand what happens in a factory, in the design room and in the warehouse. You have to truly understand accounting almost at the level of the accountants, because they don't understand systems. It's up to the IT leader to take accounting speak and turn it into a system. If you don't understand what they're talking about, you can't do it successfully."

The Insight team came away from those initial meetings energized and committed to enabling Goldenberg's vision as much as possible. "Having a true 'greenfield' opportunity was really exciting for us to jump into and take advantage of from a new technology standpoint," says Suko. "We were looking at building entire systems in the cloud, really trying to reduce the footprint of technology on-site and giving Lee greater flexibility and the peace of mind in the process."

Migrating to the cloud

The Insight team started by assessing the applications VF used to support John Varvatos, ultimately reducing the number of mission-critical applications down to about 19. "We got to clean up a lot of their infrastructure just right off the bat in those areas and then rebuild in the cloud," Suko says. "We removed a lot of equipment out of their office during the first couple of months that we never put back in."

Suko and his team outsourced the monitoring and management of the John Varvatos network infrastructure to Insight's Remote Network Operations Center (RNOC), where it remains to this day. They also made a five-year agreement to manage John Varvatos' data and network security systems on-site.

"I think we only put two or three servers on-site as their domain controllers and local file-and-print servers," says Suko. "Everything else we hosted at Rackspace, at the RNOC, and we migrated them to Microsoft® Office 365™ in the cloud as well."

By building all these disparate systems in the cloud and outsourcing as much as possible, Insight was able to meet most of Goldenberg's initial requirements. Insight had successfully migrated approximately 90% of John Varvatos' IT infrastructure away from VF within six months, replacing it with a minimal IT footprint that requires a skeleton IT staff to manage.

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Shifting attention to the front end

"Today, my entire IT department, including myself, is six people," says Goldenberg. "Oh, by the way, those six people support our 22 stores as well, not just 130 people here in headquarters. I have three people handling applications support development, and I have two techs. Everything else is in the cloud. Everything else is outsourced. We host nothing here."

With John Varvatos' back-end needs addressed, Goldenberg and Insight were able to focus on the front-end employee experience.

One thing is obvious when visiting a John Varvatos boutique or the company's headquarters: Rock 'n' roll is the soul of the designer's brand. Musicians from Iggy Pop to Slash, and celebrities from Howard Stern to Michael Strahan count on John Varvatos for menswear that's authentic to the rock 'n' roll attitude and lifestyle.

Although rock memorabilia lines the walls and music plays on every floor at the company's New York headquarters, the rock star experience did not extend to the technology tools of the trade under VF's leadership.

As Suko describes it, John Varvatos used to bring in potential new designers and show them the design studio, and "it had these ancient IBM® desktops and horrible monitors around," which led the candidates to question how committed the company was to supporting the designers in the studio.

Technology tools get the "rock star" touch.

This approach changed once John Varvatos began operating under its own power. Goldenberg told Insight, "I want to give them all the tools they need to do their job, so there's nothing holding them back from an IT standpoint."

So Insight set up a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) environment that could support the wide variety of design tools and platforms needed at headquarters.

"People brought in Apple, they brought in IBM, they brought whatever they wanted for the organization," Suko says. By replacing every device in the environment, John Varvatos was able to use the studio as a true recruiting tool to go out and get the best and brightest people for its staff.

"When you walk around their office," Suko explains, "the average employee is probably in their mid- to late-20s. So that was a game changer for them to be able to advertise, 'We've got the best technology available; come work for us.'"

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Goldenberg adds, "The Insight team came up with the expression I use all the time: 'the rock star experience.' That's really what we're trying to deliver. Whether you're a customer or an employee, we're continually asking, 'How can we deliver the rock star experience through IT?'"

Fashioning a business intelligence tool

Once John Varvatos was entirely separated from VF and all systems were operating as intended, Goldenberg and Insight turned their attention to the next game changer for the designer: a new business intelligence platform.

John Varvatos relies on three different ERP platforms to run its business: KWI for its retail functions, Demandware/Jagged Peak for e-commerce, and RLM for wholesale functions, as well as corporate and financial reporting. Each has its own set of context-specific metrics, to the extent that a basic black T-shirt was coded differently depending on the system used to track it. "It was different data, but the same information," Goldenberg explains.

John Varvatos needed a simple platform that could reach into these disparate systems and deliver visibility and standards built around the three basic building blocks of the fashion industry: color, style and size.

Reaching a crossroads

So Insight built a proof of concept based on the Microsoft Azure™ cloud platform and Power BI™ tool, one of the first of its kind at the time. The demo “knocked our socks off,” Goldenberg recalls. “So then we said, ‘OK, now let’s jump in with both feet.’”

The 18-month project was completed in spring 2015, and Goldenberg named the business intelligence tool Crossroads, after the famous Robert Johnson blues song.

The results have been transformative for Goldenberg and the rest of John Varvatos leadership, giving them actionable insight they would not have had access to otherwise. “That [Crossroads] name and logo appears on every report we work with now,” Goldenberg says, “from our daily sales flash, KPI [Key Performance Indicators] reporting, exception reporting, costing reports, inventory reports — a myriad of different reports — all of that coming through Crossroads.”

Business first, then hardware and software

Looking back, it’s difficult to comprehend the amount of work accomplished at John Varvatos in three years under Goldenberg’s leadership. “We’ve replaced everything but the wiring in the walls,” he says with a laugh. “Everything else was new — every device, every switch, every access point, every router, every server, every rack, every printer, every copier, every desktop, every laptop, every tablet and every phone. All of it had to be replaced as part of our drive for self-sufficiency.”

Throughout Goldenberg’s tenure, Insight has been a trusted partner working to bring his progressive vision to life. “They are my adjunct systems engineers,” Goldenberg says of the partnership. “When I meet with Reid [and the Insight team], we talk about our business. We don’t talk about the network. We don’t talk about hardware and software. We talk about my business.”

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That business-first focus not only matches Goldenberg’s approach, but it has built an incredibly high level of trust between the two partners. Many IT executives wouldn’t know what to do if the day-to-day monitoring and maintenance of the IT infrastructure was taken away from them. For Goldenberg, it was all part of his initial vision, working with partners he could trust.

When asked if there’s any uneasiness about outsourcing all these vital functions to third parties, Goldenberg’s response is simple: “I’m comfortable with [Insight],” he says. “I am comfortable with Microsoft managing my email. I am very comfortable with Insight’s Remote Network Operations Center monitoring my networks, my connectivity and all of my devices up to the access points. They handle all my stores, all my networks.”