Working with N Brown to evolve their infrastructure

Making N Brown a modern, agile business

N Brown was becoming constrained by its legacy eCommerce and needed to modernise its IT. The team wanted to move their disparate legacy systems to the Cloud. The aim was to cut costs, improve agility and most importantly, regain control of the systems. Due to different configurations, rebuilds and feature rollouts took weeks of testing. The challenge was that while its existing eCommerce platforms had served the company well in the past, there were issues with capacity and reliability. Plus, there was a scarcity of skills. N Brown was unable to react and make changes quick enough.

Diane Roland, Head of Cloud and Platform at N Brown explained her motivation for change: "The key driver is if we can't pivot quickly, then we're not going to remain competitive and it's a cut-throat business that we're working in."

Realising their vision in partnership with AND Digital

When N Brown first approached us with the view to migrate to the Cloud, they had an awareness of Cloud services, but wanted our expertise and support to ensure they realised its potential. They weren't confident that they had the capability to make the move successfully on their own. It was a big shift for the company, but together, we began their journey of digital transformation.

"We wanted simplification. Our existing infrastructure did not offer the flexibility to move forward. Code changes were a cumbersome, slow deployment process and there was little visibility if we found issues."

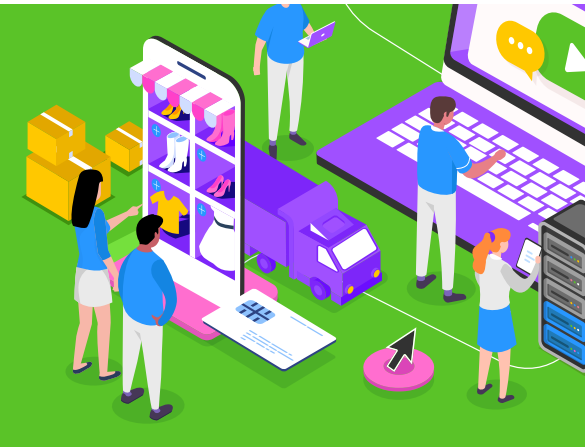Diane Roland, Head of Cloud and Platform, N Brown

N BROWN GROUP PLC

Company: N Brown Group
Industry: Retail
Country: UK
Employees: More than 2,000
Website: www.nbrown.co.uk

About N Brown

N Brown Group PLC (N Brown) is a leader within the British retail sector and currently employs over 2,000 people across the UK. The company is 'size inclusive', focusing on the needs of the underserved customers who are size 20+ and age 50+. Its brands include Ambrose Wilson, Home Essentials, Jacamo, JDWilliams, and SimplyBe.

While the group's success has been built on its traditional catalogue business it has been forced to transition into a fully-fledged online fashion retailer as the market and customer demands have changed. Today 85 percent of its revenue is generated through digital channels.

"The move took time to win the confidence of all stakeholders. And it coincided with a big strategic move as the company reinvented itself as a truly digital player. This was no simple 'lift and shift'."

Diane Roland
Head of Cloud and Platform
N Brown

Assessing their existing solution, in detail

Our first task was to complete an extensive review of the existing architecture and systems and assess the tool stack, to see what was required. This was followed by a proof of concept (PoC) to show that N Brown's main ecommerce application, Hybris, could be automated on the Cloud. This six-week project was a valuable stage of the transformation as it provided both a test of the technology stack and proved to stakeholders the potential benefits of an agile infrastructure.

N Brown had a varied infrastructure as a result of growth by acquisition and siloed systems built for individual brands. Changing that required moving large, complex databases and a variety of retail, logistics, and customer systems. N Brown had 70 Dev Servers. They were never turned off and mainly manually set up. The fragmented nature of the existing infrastructure also led to challenges around configuration, security, and testing.

Making it happen

Roland explained, "We wanted to build resilience and systems that we could scale up and down to demand, and increase our frequency of deployment to daily where we wanted to."

On the day of migration, our team was on hand, ready to tackle any unexpected issues. Roland added. "I think the sites were down for seven hours. Apart from a few niggly issues, it went really smoothly. AND Digital created a really thorough migration plan. We used the guys who'd worked on it to provide out-of-hours support to make sure there were no outages once we went live."

The move also required automation, both to make it workable and to ensure that applications and platforms stayed consistent. N Brown had many data centres linked by virtual private networks. It went live at exactly the right moment, as the team was working on the challenge of shifting several databases spread over several data centres. Team members estimate that this saved them two months of development time.

"We are trying to progress our teams and help build their knowledge. We're also building knowledge in squads with developers and tech leads to enable them to be as self-sufficient as possible."

Diane Roland, Head of Cloud and Platform, N Brown

Preparing them for their ongoing journey

With our Cloud experience and skills, we provided technical leadership to define a comprehensive new cloud strategy for N Brown and establish a solid foundation for future replatforming work.

An important element of this was to improve their in-house development capability with a DevOps centre of excellence. To help achieve that, we've been working with N Brown's existing DevOps team to upskill them so they can take full ownership as platform engineers. We pride ourselves in making a sustainable difference, ensuring that teams gain the skills to manage the technology put in place. Over two and a half years, we have supported N Brown by training nine of their technical employees. Now they're equipped to manage the platforms independently.

Seeing improvements (now and in the future)

We've helped N Brown drive the growth of its online business by improving its ability to respond to customer demands, at pace. The cloud-based microservices architecture allows N Brown's developers to use repeatable templates, standards and best practices to develop, test and deploy new functionality and products more quickly and easily.

With our support, N Brown is now on course for a substantial saving per year as it shifts more fully to the Cloud and retires existing infrastructure. This figure could well rise as more services are rebuilt and moved. There have also been impressive time savings when adding new features – deployments that previously took eight hours can now be finished in one.

By moving Hybris to the Cloud, N Brown has also reduced infrastructure costs by 25 percent. Having a single customer view means the team can work in a much more agile way and deploy whenever it likes, rather than being tied to a monthly schedule.

This project has also illustrated that a move to the cloud is an ongoing journey, not just a simple change of hosting strategy. Even the most complex and embedded systems can see benefits from a cloud move, but it takes time to migrate such systems safely and ensure they are both easy to manage and truly agile.
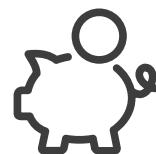
Roland concluded: "We really want to be challenging the mindset of everybody in the business to say we're never done. This is an ongoing change and an ongoing delivery where we are just going to keep improving."

Nine long-standing employees were supported and trained by ANDis

Deployments that previously took eight hours can now be finished in one

N Brown reduced their infrastructure costs by 25%