

Migration Specialties International, Inc.

217 West 2nd Street, Florence, CO 81226-1403

+1 719-371-1711, Fax: +1 888-854-3417

E-mail: Info@MigrationSpecialties.com

www.MigrationSpecialties.com



Bruce Claremont, September, 2008

Adventures in Consulting: Sleuthing & Service

We recently replaced an old VAX cluster for MAN Diesel at their Colchester, England facility. Among many other talents, MAN builds diesel engines used in ships. The Colchester facility builds and services medium-sized naval engines.

The VAX cluster was being maintained to retain access to archival design and maintenance information on engines delivered to the U.S. Navy. With a service life of 30 years or more, the engines tend to outlive the information technology used to create them, although the VAX hardware proved almost as durable. Unfortunately, the disk drives were starting to suffer the effects of age and MAN no longer had personnel on staff to properly maintain the hardware. One of the curses of well-built technology is that people tend to forget about it until it breaks.

MAN contacted Migration Specialties regarding options to replace the VAX equipment while retaining the software it supported. We reviewed various hardware and software solutions, settling on the open source SimH VAX hardware emulator as a viable, low cost solution to their requirements. Aably assisted by Mr. Tim Pass at Control-X, installation was relatively straightforward and testing was successful with one exception.

The exception was an application called SuperCapes. SuperCapes employed a rather unique licensing scheme that tied in with the VAX hardware. The port to the SimH hardware emulation environment looks like a hardware change, which the software detected. The end result was the software would not run. It issued a “license error, contact vendor” error message.

Now, anyone that deals with troublesome legacy software applications knows that they face two immediate problems. One is locating the vendor, who may no longer be in existence. If you are so lucky as to find the current vendor, the second problem is that they are often unwilling to support legacy applications. Compounding our difficulty was a complete lack of documentation for the SuperCapes application.

So the hunt was on. Like most modern IT sleuth’s, my first stop was Google. A search on SuperCapes didn’t initially turn up much. Several iterations of the search located a few articles that revealed the product had changed hands more than once, but offered no leads as to its current status.

I persevered, plowing through links to old implementation articles. Eventually I ran across the proceedings from an English trademark court case involving the SuperCapes name. From this I gleaned the name of the company that controlled SuperCapes at the time. A search on the company name turned up a product success story that referenced a product call Kapes. Guessing that Kapes was the new name for SuperCapes, I tried the URL www.kapes.com and got a hit. The product, supported by PS Industry, appeared to offer the same functionality as the old SuperCapes application although no VMS support appeared to be offered. With nothing to lose and little expectation of a response, I submitted an e-mail query outlining our problem and asking if they indeed owned SuperCapes.

Much to my surprise and pleasure, a response awaited in my inbox the very next day. Tony Hale had sent a cheerful reply stating that they indeed owned SuperCapes *and could help us with the licensing issue*. You have no idea how gratifying it is to receive an “I can help” response from a vendor for a 15 year old software application. Way too many software vendors regard legacy applications as a burden and refuse to support them.

So we worked out the details, paid a very reasonable license transfer fee, and finished out the virtual VAX port to SimH. My hat is off to Tony and PS Industry for doing software and support right.



About the author: Mr. Bruce Claremont runs an IT business focused on legacy software preservation through hardware replacement and emulation solutions. More information is available at www.MigrationSpecialties.com