Business challenge
Fort Vale aimed to ease buyer journeys by providing timely and detailed information to customers. How could it deliver new insights quickly, reliably and securely—while keeping future options open?

Transformation
Fort Vale deployed a new integrated application on an IBM® LinuxONE™ enterprise server to manage both manufacturing and customer engagement, enabling secure sharing of data at speed and scale.

Business benefits:

Improves
customer experience by delivering detailed updates to customers

9x higher
Oracle Database throughput provides headroom for business growth

GBP100k
saved in annual maintenance costs by consolidating disparate systems

"Given our global operations, we need our systems to be available round-the-clock, so reliability is a priority for us. With IBM Z, we’ve never experienced any performance or reliability problems to shake our trust in the technology."

Ian Wilson
Managing Director
Fort Vale

Fort Vale Engineering Limited is the world’s leading manufacturer and supplier of fittings for Isotank containers and tanker vehicles for the safe transportation of liquids, powders and gases. Headquartered in Burnley, the company employs 700 people in the United Kingdom and China.
Staying ahead

Fort Vale holds around 85 percent of the global market for stainless steel precision valves, helping manufacturers and logistics companies ensure the safe transit of bulk liquids, powders and gases. In the face of increasing competition from emerging manufacturers around the world, the company is always looking for ways to improve the value it offers to customers and stay ahead of the competition.

Ian Wilson, Managing Director of Fort Vale, says: “Our working philosophy at Fort Vale is ‘continuous improvement’. In any market, the company that will win business is the one that makes it easiest for you to buy from them.”

Fort Vale designs and manufactures specialized, high-precision equipment, often adapted to specific customer requirements. The company knew that it could enhance the purchasing experience for its customers by sharing production and logistics data, including CAD files, detailed product information, manufacturing milestones and precise delivery timelines.

“We wanted to enhance the customer experience by providing faster, more detailed information,” says Ian Wilson.

“Our homegrown ERP system was exceptionally good at its core functions but would have required an enormous amount of work to open up to a more customer-centric future. We had also added ancillary functionality running on other platforms, creating some integration challenges, so we wanted to replace the existing landscape with a single, highly integrated solution.”

Best of both worlds

To get closer to its customers, Fort Vale decided to standardize on a packaged application to manage manufacturing, logistics and customer engagement, selecting a solution from IFS Applications. The only sticking point was that the new application was certified only for Linux on x86-architecture servers—which Fort Vale felt was not a sufficiently robust platform for its needs.

“We had used IBM Z enterprise servers for decades and knew that the performance, stability and vendor support were second to none,” Wilson says. “Given our global operations, we need our systems to be available round-the-clock, so reliability is a priority for us. With IBM Z, we’ve never experienced any performance or reliability problems to shake our trust in the technology, and we’ve also enjoyed exceptional technical support from IBM’s expert systems engineers.”

Fort Vale enlisted the help of IBM Business Partner TES to get its chosen ERP solution supported by the ISV on the IBM LinuxONE platform—an enterprise server dedicated to Linux workloads. Wilson comments: “We have run Linux as a z/VM guest on IBM Z for more than 15 years, so we knew that LinuxONE would give us the performance and reliability we wanted.”

TES worked closely with IFS—the vendor of the ERP solution—to demonstrate the advantages of IBM LinuxONE, and soon secured its agreement to support the platform. “TES has a small team, with great IBM expertise, and they are very easy to work with,” Wilson remarks. “The guys from TES were incredibly responsive and careful, and helped us work with IFS to get the perfect solution for our needs.”
Wilson says: "As part of our drive to stay ahead, we always want to run on the latest technology that IBM has available, so we can continue to improve performance. The implementation of LinuxONE and DS8882 has gone extremely well, and we are steadily moving functionality from our existing environment to the new IFS application."

He added: “So far, the new solution has worked perfectly on the IBM LinuxONE servers. Our long experience of Linux on IBM Z means that the environment is easy to manage and administer. Equally, the team from IFS, who previously only had experience of Linux on x86, say they also love working on IBM LinuxONE.”

**Full speed ahead**

By running its new, integrated ERP solution on the open and robust IBM LinuxONE platform, Fort Vale will be able to keep customers up to speed on model specifications and delivery timelines, thereby enhancing its competitive advantage.

“With an integrated view of our entire business, we can generate detailed information about where products are in the supply chain, and when they will be ready for customers,” says Wilson. “The performance and openness of IBM LinuxONE will make it easy for us to keep customers informed about their orders and build stronger relationships with them.”

The adoption of IBM LinuxONE servers has also delivered significant performance improvements for Linux-based workloads at Fort Vale.

Wilson explains: “Running our Oracle Database on the new infrastructure has increased transaction throughput significantly. Where we previously handled 40,000 transactions a minute, the new technology can handle 370,000 transactions—that’s more than nine times faster. At the same time, the new IBM solution is also saving us money. By consolidating our various platforms, we are saving GBP 100,000 in annual maintenance costs.”

The new disaster recovery arrangements add increased resiliency to the company’s most critical systems, so Fort Vale staff can rest assured that manufacturing processes are safe from disruption and data loss. Previously, the company would have needed to recover to rented servers from tape backups, requiring significant time and effort. Today, the entire production environment is replicated to a duplicate infrastructure, enabling rapid, low-risk recovery of services with no loss of data and very limited downtime.

“Disaster recovery is incredibly important to us,” Wilson says. “Data is a vital resource for our business, second only to our people. With everything on one system, we wanted it to be protected from a single point of failure. We’ve tested failover to the new disaster recovery system, and the data is up to date almost to the nearest second, while the maximum recovery time has never been greater than half an hour.”

Fort Vale deployed an **IBM LinuxONE** server running SUSE Linux Enterprise Server to support the new IFS application, and deployed **IBM DS8882** all-flash storage alongside. To improve application availability on an already resilient platform, the company deployed a second LinuxONE server and DS8882 storage array in a second data center and set up replication between the two sites. In addition to significantly reducing downtime in the event of a disaster, this enabled Fort Vale to eliminate its existing tape-based backup arrangements.
Wilson continues: “In practice, this means that if something goes wrong, we will most likely only lose about 3-4 minutes of service to the outside world, rather than several hours—this reduces the risk of delays to customer deliveries.”

With enhanced performance and reliability for its infrastructure and software, Fort Vale is ready to continue innovating and developing its services to deliver the best possible value to its customers.

Wilson concludes: “Thanks to IBM and TES, our infrastructure is even faster and better integrated than before. We can now easily and securely open our systems and data to customers, so they can stay informed on our manufacturing and delivery timelines. This helps us to make the process of buying from us as easy as possible.

“At our current rate of success, the company is doubling in size every ten years—and the easy scalability of the LinuxONE platform means that we can trust IBM technology to support us as we grow.”

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Ian Wilson, Managing Director, Fort Vale