

Sony helps RTBF to increase its efficiency and offer viewers impeccable image quality



Background

RTBF: an autonomous, state-owned cultural broadcaster

Since 1977, the French-speaking television and radio broadcaster RTBF has enjoyed cultural autonomy, freedom to report and a degree of independence from the government. Over the years, the company has expanded despite remaining true to its mission: to promote cultural development, to be a permanent source of education and to offer appealing entertainment . Today, RTBF comprises 5 production sites (Brussels, Charleroi, Namur, Liège and Mons), 3 television channels (La Une, La Deux and TBF Sat) and 5 radio stations (La Première, Vivacité, Musiq'3, Classic 21, Pure FM and RTBF International).

Since 2000, RTBF has turned to new technology as a means of responding to the ever greater demands of viewers. Jean-Pol Volont, Manager and Project Leader of the 'switchers' project at RTBF, describes this natural evolution: 'Besides seeking to improve its service to viewers, in 2004 RTBF also hoped to bring its various production equipment into compliance with a single format in order to increase company efficiency and profitability. In view of technology advances and the drive towards High Definition (HD) within the broadcasting industry, investing in HD seemed the obvious choice'.

A production-oriented project

Optimisation is at the heart of the project, according to Didier Vanzeune, Manager for TV Production (engineering): 'RTBF produces around 50% of the programmes which it distributes. In order to maintain this production capacity despite an increase in distribution niches and without increasing our workforce, it is imperative that we have the tools necessary to automate certain processes.'

The migration to digital broadcasting is therefore a project which sees the migration of production processes from an analogue model, whereby products are conveyed using magnetic media, to a model based on the exchange of files containing descriptive and administrative images and data. This process calls for a structure of servers and networks.

The first stage was to take stock of all the current processes and requirements involved in developing an architectural framework capable of responding to every demand.

The next stage, planned for 2007-2008, should make it possible to define the most modern processes and therefore to establish the workflows.

Product(s):

- video switchers (MVS-8000)
- mobile control units
- LCD monitor

‘At the same time, a call for applications has been published to enable the awarding of a restricted contract based on ambitious specifications but which takes into consideration the state of the art, in other words the technology currently available to manufacturers. Based on the best proposals, we will implement a test platform to ascertain the supplementary developments needed for the attainment of our objectives,’ continues Didier Vanzeune.

RTBF based its decision to team up with Sony on all these criteria. For Alain Ausloos, ‘the Sony proposal was the most comprehensive according to our purchasing criteria. Besides, from a technical point of view, we opted for Sony because it is a company which has proved that it is more than capable of providing equipment for TV production and post-production.’

As part of a ‘parallel’ yet essential contract for the migration to digital broadcasting, RTBF is renewing its outside broadcast cameras, mobile production units and video switchers (MVS-8000), as well as HD flat screen monitors (High Definition TFT monitor) and monitor walls (wall production desk: LMD-232W & LMD-172W).

Implementation: a decisive stage

RTBF faced challenges on various levels. The migration to HD production not only meant switching from a 4:3 to a 16:9 aspect ratio but also upgrading existing infrastructures. It was also necessary to retain the old technologies whilst managing the impact caused by the new technologies. As Jean-Pol Volont explains, ‘This project is particular in that Sony has had to adapt in order to meet our demands, which vary greatly from one project to another. For example at the Charleroi site, RTBF had to integrate the switcher (MVS8000A) into an existing Standard Definition (SD) environment which was due to be converted to HD following its relocation to a new building, whilst the switchers installed by Alain Ausloos on the new OB (outside broadcast) vehicles had to be able to work directly in both SD and HD.’

The decision to team up with Sony

Alain Ausloos, Manager and Project Leader of the mobile production unit project at RTBF, explained the decision: ‘Purchasing this new HD hardware was important and represented a big step forward for our staff.’

The benefits of Sony were compatibility, flexibility and also expertise; this notably included vital expertise in the construction of mobile production units.

Besides the overall technical value, processing performance, technological advancement, cost and turnaround times, all of which constituted the main purchase criteria, other elements also had to be taken into account when considering which equipment to buy. As Jean-Pol Volont explains, ‘Acquiring the same family of switchers for use in all projects had to enable greater operating flexibility and simpler planning. The harmonisation of equipment also had to enable the migration of our equipment to HD format to enable effective cooperation between the various engineering departments as well as better management of individual components stored within a central warehouse. We wanted to be certain of having a mixing process which would function perfectly within our chosen environment.’

All stages in the construction of the mobile production units were undertaken by RTBF and their subcontractors. However, Sony played a leading role in the delicate stage of integration. As Alain Ausloos reveals: ‘The equipment was integrated into vehicles equipped with empty technical bays. These vehicles were adapted for audiovisual production. This kind of vehicle-based integration is fairly complex because space, weight and power consumption must all be taken into account. Of course, this is without considering constraints linked to mobility such as vibrations, thermal shock and humidity, which all had to be managed. Although we had some experience in the construction of OB vehicles (the SD11 built in 2001), we were surrounded by professionals in the field.’

Furthermore, other important aspects such as employee training could not be overlooked. 'A training programme was put in place to help both operators and engineers master the new equipment. I think that Sony's dedicated contacts, its expertise in video technology, and also the availability of its staff have enabled the new equipment to be implemented smoothly for all projects,' states Jean-Pol Volont.

Customer Benefits

In the end, the project has proven a real success. RTBF has attained its dual objective:

- Greater efficiency: 'Thanks to our joint operation with Sony, our production and post-production processes are clearly more efficient than before,' underlines Didier Vanzeune. This statement is supported by Jean-Pol Volont, who affirms: 'The equipment has multiple advantages: the installation is much easier to use and the management of recorded images is simpler and more efficient. This allows us to increase our productivity and leads to more dynamic image production. This is a great step forward, given that recorded tapes are no longer used in our line of work (tapeless workflow). The resulting advantages are numerous: improved quality, more fluent workflow, easier management of content and equipment.'
- Top quality images: 'As we continue to assimilate this new technology and as HD continues to invade the home, the benefits will become increasingly apparent to our viewers,' adds Alain Ausloos.

Didier Vanzeune sums up the joint operation with Sony in the following terms: 'Over the years Sony has become one of our most reliable partners in carrying out large-scale projects. In other words, Sony was the ideal choice in our bid to introduce digital TV.'

The project is due for completion end of 2007, early 2008.

Sony – The Market Leader

Thanks to its extensive experience as a manufacturer of audio, visual, communication and IT products intended for the general public as well as industry professionals, Sony is a truly unique source of expertise.

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