

WHISE provides an innovative service package for the real estate sector via Software-as-a-Service

More than 500 real estate agencies have a complete solution at WHISE for office automation, portfolio management, reporting and online publishing. Thousands of real estate properties and millions of pictures are described in the online service package and are automatically published on popular classified ad sites. As a hosting partner, Combell combines rapidity and flexibility with unrivalled availability.



Real estate buyers often start doing their research online. Websites and sector-specific software for real estate agencies therefore constitute a niche market that has been around for over ten years. With more than 500 real estate agencies in its portfolio, WHISE is one of Belgium's market leaders, with a clear choice for Software-as-a-Service (SaaS).

"Real estate agents quickly realised that the Internet was important for them. I have always been surprised how fast many domain names were registered by some real estate agents", recalls Jean Waucquez, managing director at

WHISE. "Some competitors were already active in the market, but we have been the first to come up with a real online solution in Belgium. And a lot of real estate agents seized this new opportunity. They had immediately recognised the importance of the Internet."

A complete solution

"Our service package, WHOMAN2, works completely in the Cloud. Nevertheless, we went for a 'smart client' that can work without an Internet connection if necessary, so that the application can also be used on mobile devices", says Jean Waucquez. "For real estate agencies, this is a



WHISE's ISSUE

- Software-as-a-Service
- 24/7 reliable application hosting
- Fast integration of new customers
- Flexible server and storage capacity
- 3000 simultaneous connections
- Integration with popular media websites

Combell's SOLUTION

- Dedicated hosting
- Virtualisation (VMware)
- Advanced automation
- Microsoft SQL Server, .NET
- SAN storage network
- Integration via web services, text files...

COMBELL'S ASSETS according to WHISE

- Secured environment, fully managed
- Data protection and fast restore
- Predictable costs
- Shared monitoring

Jean Waucquez, WHISE:
"Combella provides a very complete monitoring service for the servers and the data. Their service is excellent."

“Combelle provides us with the flexibility we need, at the level of both the infrastructure and the associated services.”

complete solution that takes care of managing real estate properties and automatic publishing on well-known classified ad sites such as Hebbes, Immoweb, Logic-Immo and Vlan.”

“The real estate agent fills in every piece of information only once. The basic information will then be used for managing portfolios, matching supply and demand, publishing brochures, sending e-mail campaigns, planning visits, managing agendas and reporting. There are also an increasing number of links to partners for web design, creating posters, etc. Many real estate agents also ask us for a direct integration with their own website.”

“The software is extremely powerful. Recently, we launched a complete solution for new construction projects. In that solution, real estate properties are in a complex hierarchy, ranging from business parks or residential projects to each individual apartment, parking spot or basement, including buildings, floors or building phases. In accordance with the Belgian ‘Breyne Act’, we offer a phased invoicing process that takes account of substantial changes made during the construction process. Everything is automatically recalculated using a direct link with several invoicing programs.”

Thousands of users, millions of graphic objects

“WHISE provides its services to more than 500 real estate agencies, which amounts to about 2000 users during a typical working day. Usually, there are also 1000 additional simultaneous sessions opened by visitors who query the database via the websites of affiliated real estate agencies. Together, all of these people cause a very high load on our infrastructure at Combelle, with sometimes up to more than 1500 connections per second”, says Jean Waucquez. “This means that any failure affects about 3000 simultaneous users. These users are people who work directly on our systems, not on popular classified ad sites where the numbers of visitors are many times higher. It is crucial that we avoid downtime, using robust system architecture and constant control and monitoring.”

“The largest classified ad sites constantly get the most recent data from us. On the other hand, when someone signs up on a classified ad site, we process this information and provide them to one or several real estate agents, depending on the existing trade agreements. For all these reasons, traffic is very high on our servers.”

“We now have six dedicated servers in use as well as an impressive storage volume using SAN (storage area network) technology. The flexibility of the infrastructure is very important to us. We have to be able to add extra servers or storage capacity quickly and effortlessly as our customers grow in number and in real usage. Combelle provides us with the flexibility we need, at the level of both the infrastructure and the associated services.”

“Each real estate agent uses an average of about 10 or 20 Gigabyte (GB) of active storage capacity. These are just the most recent information; I am not even talking about archives. Multiply by 500 and you will get an idea of the storage capacity we have on our SAN storage systems. Additionally, there are also archived and deleted data. We keep the latter for a few weeks, because we know that, in practice, data are often deleted by mistake.”

“For back-up and recovery, the challenge is not so much the volume of stored data as the enormous quantity of files. Usually, these files are not 1 GB a piece, but there are millions of graphic objects of just a few kilobytes (kB). That makes an unexpected recovery quite complicated. Until now, we never had to perform a complete recovery. But it often happens that a customer asks us to recover specific files he deleted by accident. In such cases, Combelle always finds a swift and efficient solution. Data storage is completely separated from the server systems and our database is fully redundant. This way, we are protected against downtime and data loss.”

Integration via web services

“Real estate agents and owners are usually very demanding people. When the status of a property changes—a new price, new pictures or a modified description—changes must be applied in no

WHISE'S IDENTIKIT

WHISE is an international software producer for the real estate sector with an outstanding position in the Belgian market. More than 500 Belgian offices use WHISE's sector-specific applications via Software-as-a-Service. An increasing number of real estate agents in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom are using its software, which has been designed for multilingual and multinational environments. More info: www.whise.eu

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time in both our own administrative system and all online advertisements. A completely automatic link, preferably based on web services, is what makes this possible.”

“Our customers’ real estate properties are automatically published on classified ad sites. Integration works in both directions. Unfortunately, not all parties concerned are open to web services. Some still work in an old-fashioned way, with text files. In such cases, we forward all the information and have to check—multiple times—if everything has arrived. Reactions from interested buyers then arrive via an automatic e-mail that we parse into structured information. Combell makes sure that the data can flow securely in both directions through the firewall infrastructure.”

“Another challenge is the variety of the data. There are structured data and then documents, pictures or even videos. Actually, the structured data are especially extensive. We have about 500 fields in our database to describe each real estate property. A field can e.g. be a category (apartment, building plot, house...) and then a subcategory: bungalow, cottage, etc. Each party defines such data in its own way. So, when we build links with external partners, we use all these database fields as part of the matching process. That makes things even more complicated.”

Support and knowledge transfer

“We adapted our application step by step in order to be more flexible and to make maintenance easier. In this context, we have always been able to count on Combell’s excellent level of expertise. Initially, our systems were based on ColdFusion and SQL Server. Later on, we traded ColdFusion for .NET”, says Jean Waucquez. “Combell provided us with excellent advice in all these areas—not that this was their function, but it is truly pleasant to work with a partner who can do more than just hosting. Of course, Combell also took care of securing our data.”

“WHISE and Combell grew together over the years to become more professional. It is true that, at the beginning, we had many stability problems. Our server address, IP number ‘75’, was notorious.

When we phoned for help, we did not even have to spell out the complete address”, recalls Ben Huybrechts. “Back then, Combell drew our attention to several flaws, always in a very professional and constructive manner. At that time, we had to ask for their support quite a few times.”

“After weeks of research, it appeared that our version of ColdFusion was simply not compatible with our version of Windows. So, we had to reinstall everything”, confirms Jean Waucquez. “At that time, Combell guided us very well. Now, we work using .NET and SQL Server. Combell had the necessary resources to support us with those technologies too.”

Control and monitoring

“We constantly monitor 50 essential features of our own application”, says Jean Waucquez. “This concerns various features: the operation of the servers, the processing of customer information, the matching process and the exports to external sites. When a problem occurs, we need to be able to act immediately.”

“We also provide constant monitoring of the information on the media websites. Just because everything goes well once does not mean things will keep going well. Media websites constantly make changes and create new rules about every week. When this happens, there are two things we must do: export our data immediately and validate the new rules in our own application. We must prevent our users from entering a real estate property incorrectly, which would cause an error message. So, we constantly adapt the validation rules.”

“For its part, Combell provides a very complete monitoring service for the servers and the data. Their experts monitor countless parameters and their service is excellent. When a problem occurs, they act in a smooth and fast manner”, confirms Ben Huybrechts. “Trust is crucial in such situations. Over the past ten years, I have never seen Combell give in to panic. As for data security and server security and monitoring, we do not have to worry about a thing. Because Combell takes care of everything.”



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More info about this solution?
Contact one of our account managers on
0800-8-567890