

RANDOM ACCESS

Through a sales-support solution based on the Microsoft®

Windows NT™ Advanced Server operating system and the Microsoft SQL Server database for Windows NT, a major reseller of computer networking solutions saves hundreds of hours weekly in administrative costs, extended the life of its central corporate minicomputer for two years, saving more than \$100,000, and demonstrated its own commitment to the technology it is implementing for its customers.

Founded in 1984, Denver-based Random Access took less than a decade to become the largest reseller of computer networking solutions in the Western United States. By 1992 it had achieved a four-year average growth rate of 40 percent, winning recognition by *Inc.* and *Fortune* magazines as one of the country's fastest-growing public companies. Also in 1992, its revenue surpassed the \$100 million mark. But that year brought Random Access face to face with a problem common to rapidly growing young companies: how to provide its sales representatives the information and automation they needed to do their work efficiently.

For many years, the company relied on discrete information-management tools. At its Denver headquarters, an HP® 3000 running a proprietary database and connected to a Novell® NetWare® local area network handled general ledger, purchasing, order entry, inventory control, and other transaction-based corporate tasks. In the field, sales representatives used their own, PC-based systems for managing contacts and maintaining pricing information, periodically accessing the corporate database via modem to request additional information on currently stocked products. Lack of coordination between the different systems, however, caused delays in performing common procedures such as pricing, quoting, reporting, and processing of product returns. "We had lots of information," says Senior Vice President of Sales David Meyers. "But coming from so many different sources, it often was unavailable when we needed it."

For example, to obtain pricing information on a single stocked item could easily require three to five phone calls. More troublesome, the HP proprietary database did not maintain information on unstocked items. To be able to quote such items, sales representatives might spend several days filling out forms and routing them through various departments.

At the other end of the sales cycle, a product return involved copious paperwork—six handwritten forms, with six separate opportunities for transcription errors—that commonly required two or three days for processing. Even more serious, adding the functionality required to make new information available on the proprietary system might easily call for a two-month turnaround and incur a cost of \$30,000-50,000. “Often, we found ourselves wanting specialized reports, such as purchasing trends for certain customers, but with the cost of enhancing the existing system to generate such reports, we sometimes had to just do without,” Director of Operations Bryant Delaney explains.

Hardware limitations also posed problems. As sales-related queries increased on the HP® 3000, they began slowing response time for users in shipping and order entry, frequently tying up the system for half a minute or longer. What’s more, Random Access determined that an upgrade alone would not solve the problem. According to an internal study, even with a half-million-dollar investment the system would have exceeded storage and processing capacity within a year, degrading performance and threatening data integrity. “Ultimately, the cost of transactions would have cut into our profitability,” Delaney says. “What’s worse, because customers will

not tolerate incomplete or untimely information, our growth would have suffered as well.”

Performance, Ease of Management Determine Solution

In the fall of 1992, Random Access MIS Director Anders Snortland began evaluating a solution. Essentially, it called for augmenting the functionality of the HP 3000 with an additional database residing on a COMPAQ® ProSignia system connected into the NetWare LAN and accessible via modem from the field.

For the operating system Snortland selected Microsoft Windows NT Advanced Server, and for the server database he chose Microsoft SQL Server for Windows NT, with a Microsoft Access front end. “In one critical test, Windows NT Advanced Server ran ten times as fast as the other operating systems we were considering,” he reports. He also liked its approach to memory management and its ease of administration. Ease of use led him to SQL Server for Windows NT and Microsoft Access, as well as what he considered these products’ flexibility for growth and their efficient approach to programming.

Development began in early December 1992. An engineering team from Novell handled networking issues, while Snortland and a team from Microsoft Consulting Services developed the application. By the following February they completed a beta version of the system, known as the Sales Support Project (SSP), and over the next six months Snortland streamlined it. The total cost of SSP came to just under \$50,000, which covered hardware, networking, software, programming, and consulting. Training cost the company

virtually nothing, Snortland says, because the application was designed to be especially easy to learn and because most Random Access employees already had been using the Microsoft Windows operating system for a year or longer.

Today SSP is regularly accessed by about half of Random Access's 250 employees in 12 departments at headquarters and 19 branch offices across the United States and Europe. At headquarters, users access the system over the NetWare LAN, and from field offices via modem. Through SSP they obtain information on everything from product availability and pricing to customer purchase history. Through its connection to the LAN, SSP also enables users to enter quotes, arrange for product configuration, monitor order status, and request product returns, automatically flagging employees in the appropriate departments to set the required processes in motion.

To keep the SSP database current with respect to pricing of unstocked items, Snortland updates the system daily with information that he receives over modem from primary suppliers. Pricing on stocked items and status of pending orders and of returns are downloaded nightly over Ethernet from the HP 3000, which stores master sales files and continues to handle general-ledger, inventory-control, and other corporate tasks.

Major Process Efficiencies Lead to Dramatic Cost Savings

Operations Director Delaney says SSP is benefiting Random Access throughout the sales cycle. "Now, a current price book is available immediately in a format consistent throughout the company with information even on unstocked

products," he explains. "As a result, sales representatives can answer most requests for pricing information in about a minute." Preparing an order, sales representatives can obtain and compile all the information they need with a few clicks of the mouse and without filling out a single handwritten form—reducing the time spent on that process to less than a day.

Returns, implemented in a similar fashion, are now processed in about an hour apiece—without redundant paperwork or repeated opportunities for transcription errors. "In general, we're saving hundreds of hours in administrative costs every week, and in the area of returns alone, we've avoided the expense of hiring an additional three employees," Delaney says.

Another benefit, Snortland points out, is the ease with which new information availability and process automation can be implemented through the new system. "Before, we might receive 10–15 change requests a year, only a fraction of which we could implement on the proprietary system due to cost and time considerations," he says. "Today, we're implementing three or four such requests a month on SSP at a cost so minimal that we're not even tracking it."

SSP also has relieved the growth pressures on the company's HP system, dramatically improving performance for regular users and, with the help of recent CPU and storage upgrades, extending the system's useful life for a fraction of the anticipated cost. "We expect to get at least two more years out of the HP for about \$100,000 less than we might otherwise have spent on enhancements," Delaney says.

In addition, SSP is proving itself as a valuable sales tool. "Not only are we doing business, faster, better, and at a

lower cost, but we're doing it by using the same leading-edge technologies we're implementing in our customers' organizations," Delaney says.

Ideally Positioned for the Future

Future plans at Random Access focus on making information even more timely by increasing SSP database updates from once every 24 hours to periodically throughout the day.

Upgrading information access is also a priority, for which Random Access will implement a wide area network for the company's branch offices.

In addition, Random Access is working on a version of SSP including a module for electronic data interchange that will enable customers to place orders online. The goal is to eliminate administrative overhead on both sides and reduce turnaround time between order and delivery from 3–5 days to same-day shipping. Another SSP enhancement will extend the system's functionality for Macintosh® users, who now can access SSP but cannot perform transactions on it. Yet another enhancement, employing Microsoft Excel macros, will enable SSP to automatically prepare custom executive reports, covering areas such as sales performance and purchasing trends tracked by customer, by region, and by season.

As for implementing these enhancements, Snortland believes that Windows NT Advanced Server as the SSP technology platform has put Random Access in an ideal position. "What we're doing is the wave of the future, distributing corporate data to employees all over the country in a form they can access and manipulate quickly and conveniently," he says. Delaney concurs. "The technology is there, we're actively implementing it,

and we're aware of all the things that still can be done," he says. "There's nothing slowing us down."

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Customer Support Centre at (800) 563-9048. If you require text telephone services (TT/TDD), call (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary.

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Bryant Delaney
Director of Operations
Random Access

Solution Summary

Industry

Computer network reselling

Business Solution

Sales-support system streamlining information access and automating processes for quoting, ordering, configuring, and returning products

Architecture

Microsoft SQL Server database for Windows NT running on a server connected by Ethernet backbone to an HP-3000-based proprietary system and supporting dial-in access by PC-based users across North America and Europe

Products Used

Microsoft Excel
Microsoft SQL Server for Windows NT

Microsoft Access®

Microsoft Windows NT Advanced Server

Development Resources

One internal system designer and programmer and a team from Microsoft Consulting Services working 60 days to initial release; one internal designer working over the next six months to streamline system

Development Time and Cost

To initial release: 60 days. Total cost: \$50,000.

Benefits

Saves hundreds of hours weekly in sales-administration costs and has saved \$100,000 in upgrade costs for the corporate minicomputer

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