



Communications Provider Speeds Processes by 50 Percent, Cuts Costs by 25 Percent

Overview

Country: United States

Industry: Telecommunications

Customer Profile

Based in Cary, North Carolina, Access Point Inc. is a privately-held Competitive Local Exchange Carrier with more than 10,000 customers in 19 states.

Business Situation

Access Point Inc. needed to expand its invoicing solution to support order management and provide streamlined, automated workflow.

Solution

The Windows-based, ASP-hosted CostGuard.NET solution automates workflow, integrates order management and invoicing systems, and provides the agility to meet rapidly evolving needs.

Benefits

- Processes increased up to 50 percent
- Costs cut \$216,000, up to 25 percent
- Customer satisfaction increased
- Agility to offer new products

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Greg Taylor, Director of Operational Support Systems, Access Point Inc.

Access Point Inc., an integrated communications services provider, uses the .NET-connected CostGuard.NET order support system/billing support system from Info Directions to streamline and accelerate its processes, reduce costs, and increase customer satisfaction. CostGuard.NET runs on Microsoft® Windows Server System™. Windows Server System is integrated server infrastructure software, designed to help IT professionals deliver new business value through simplified solution development, deployment, and management. CostGuard.NET replaced a legacy AS400-based solution that was difficult to expand and integrate with other applications. CostGuard.NET automates order-management and process monitoring, speeding order fulfillment by 19 percent and cycle processing by 50 percent. The company has been able to reduce costs by up to 25 percent, for a savings of \$216,000 per year. Access Point Inc.



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Situation

Access Point Inc.’s business has grown tremendously since its founding in 1996. This provider of integrated communications services to small-and medium-sized businesses has carved a successful niche in the telecommunications market as an alternative for companies that want personalized attention and quality customer service along with competitive market pricing. In addition to local and long distance voice communications, Access Point Inc. also offers:

- Three types of conferencing: audio, video, and Web
- Dedicated data
- Internet services, and
- A range of partner programs

This success and growth has brought with it new challenges for Access Point Inc. For example, Access Point Inc.’s AS400-based billing support system (BSS) was perfectly adequate to the task when Access Point Inc. was primarily a long-distance provider.

But with the proliferation of its services, the inflexibility of this solution became an increasing bottleneck for the company. Without APIs or other mechanisms to easily integrate the solution with other applications, it was difficult to move data in and out of the system and to create a data link to the internal sales team and the agent channel – an important group of users who now had an urgent need to access the system. Data had to be manually rekeyed, a relatively slow and costly process that could also introduce inaccuracies.

Beyond that, the solution had never been designed to handle order-management and workflow. A full operational support system (OSS) was exactly what Access Point Inc. now needed. Access Point Inc. wanted to eliminate repetitive processes and create an infrastructure for proactive monitoring and

management of orders, one that would ensure orders were handled with maximum efficiency and speed while reducing the time and cost that Access Point Inc. personnel had to spend on such processing.

In addition, the growing number and complexity of Access Point Inc.’s services made it imperative that the company manage its product catalog – and add new offerings to that catalog – quickly and easily, so that call-center staff could respond effectively to both new and existing customers. But the previous AS400 solution offered a clumsy “green screen” interface. Users had great difficulty navigating the system, sometimes having to sift through seven or more screens, and resulting in incorrect orders that had to be corrected manually.

“The AS400 system had served us for five years, but it was time for a change,” says Greg Taylor, Director of Operational Support Systems, Access Point Inc. “We were billing 10,000 accounts monthly and handling 13 million call detail records per month. Any mistakes or delays had a direct impact on customer satisfaction. We couldn’t afford to get it wrong.”

Taylor and his team considered replacing their AS400 solution with a full OSS/BSS from their existing provider – but balked at the seven-figure cost of conversion and implementation. They also considered a custom solution as well as commercially available OSS packages.

Solution

The solution that Access Point Inc. adopted is the.NET-connected, ASP-hosted CostGuard.NET OSS/BSS solution from Info Directions. CostGuard.NET manages rating, billing, workflow, customer care, taxation, collections, order management and selling activities for telecommunications companies. Its Web-based solution both manages billing and

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support functions and provides workflow automation features to produce efficiencies throughout the back office.

The solution is built on Microsoft .NET Framework and Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000. It was created with the Visual Studio® .NET integrated development environment and the Visual C#® .NET development language. Originally supported on Windows® 2000 Server, the solution is migrating to Windows Server™ 2003. Both Windows Server 2003 and SQL Server 2000 are components of Windows Server System, integrated server infrastructure software.

The Right Partner

“We liked Info Directions’ people as soon as we met them,” says Taylor. “Like us, Info Directions is a young, aggressive company that wants to make its mark in the industry. They are clearly focused on solving the challenges that competitive telecom providers like us face on a day-to-day basis. They had targeted exactly our segment of the market and, consequently, their solution met our needs.”

Taylor says that Access Point Inc. was impressed by Info Directions’ willingness to accept its input for product development. As well, he was intrigued by a solution that offered both billing support and operational support, including workflow management – exactly the combination that Access Point Inc. was seeking.

The Right Technology

The fact that CostGuard.NET is based on Microsoft technology was a major plus for Taylor and his colleagues.

“Because CostGuard.NET is based on the Windows Server platform, we saw it fitting easily and well with our existing environment,” says Taylor. “We were also attracted to the Windows interface, which we

felt would solve the navigation problems our customer-facing personnel had with the green-screen solution. We wanted to reduce hold times, call times, and call backs. The Windows interface could contribute to all that.”

The solution runs on any desktop with the .NET Framework version 1.1 – a standard component of the Microsoft Windows XP Professional workstations deployed at Access Point Inc. When the client application runs, it uses a Web service to download and install any updated application DLLs, ensuring that the application is always up-to-date. The use of Visual C#, .NET and Windows Forms gives that client application the richness and easy navigation capabilities that Access Point Inc. wanted. The solution uses XML to send billing data to Access Point Inc.’s print vendor, enabling highly customized invoices to be created quickly and easily.

The use of .NET class libraries and a custom scripting engine makes it easy for Access Point Inc. to create custom business rules and attach them to objects to reflect evolving workflow patterns without having to implement entirely new versions of the software. Because the application runs on the client with only data flowing back to the hosted servers, the solution combines the speed of client/server software with the cost-savings and zero-maintenance associated with Web-hosted solutions.

CostGuard.NET also uses the Microsoft Office® System to deliver data directly to familiar Microsoft Office Excel spreadsheets for easy review and analysis. SQL Server is “the heart and soul of the application,” according to Info Directions President Don Culeton. SQL Data Transformation Services facilitated the one-time conversion from the legacy solution and continues to enable integration of millions of daily call detail records. SQL Replication services are being

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used to create a separate data warehouse that enables fast, rich, customized data reporting.

Planning and Using the Solution

Access Point Inc. chose CostGuard.NET in June 2003 and went live with the solution seven months later, in December 2003. In between, the chief challenge was developing the custom workflow processes to handle order monitoring and management. The two companies jointly evaluated each step in Access Point Inc.'s business processes, from sales and order capture to fulfillment, customer care, and invoicing. Info Directions suggested ways to streamline those processes and then assembled the object-oriented business logic to reflect the result.

Access Point Inc. runs a billing cycle every week. A key objective for the company was to manage the migration to CostGuard.NET without interrupting any of those cycles or significantly changing the way it presented invoice data to customers – either of which could have resulted in major customer dissatisfaction. Repeated testing of the switchover enabled it to be made without any parallel processing in production. The IT team turned off the AS400 solution on a Friday, turned on the CostGuard.NET solution the following Monday, and took just three days to confirm the migration. CostGuard.NET produced the first round of invoices without any significant interruption to the billing cycles.

The use of CostGuard.NET for order management is the biggest change of the solution for Access Point Inc. The sales channel uses a new-customer wizard to capture data on new customers and kick-off the workflow process. The solution automates the acquisition of credit data on new customers and confirms credit approval. Product review confirms the availability and accuracy of the products and prices offered

to the customer. Service orders are established and then follow any of several paths to the appropriate local and/or long-distance carriers for implementation. The solution confirms that orders are submitted, received, and implemented, and then activates the billing process.

A key advantage of the CostGuard.NET order support solution is its exception handling. Previously, Access Point Inc. employees managed every process manually – a time consuming and costly approach. With exception handling, the CostGuard.NET solution handles most processes automatically, referring to employees only those process results that fall outside of parameters defined by Access Point Inc., indicating there may be a problem that requires human intervention.

Benefits

Processes up to 50 Percent Faster

CostGuard.NET's order management workflow has succeeded in streamlining and accelerating Access Point Inc.'s processes. The company has cut order fulfillment time by 19 percent, boosting customer satisfaction and generating initial revenues more quickly.

In addition, the company has accelerated billing cycle processing by more than 50 percent. Cycles that formerly took eight hours to run can now be completed in three hours or less. As a result, cycles no longer need to be run at night – the company now has the flexibility to run cycles whenever it wishes. Even invoicing happens more quickly – in just three days, down 25 percent.

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Costs Cut up to 25 Percent

Faster, more efficient processes are also less expensive processes. The solution is reducing data processing and cycle production costs by more than 20 percent compared to the former solution, a savings of \$15,000 monthly. Access Point Inc. is also saving about 25 percent -- \$3,000 monthly -- in invoice printing costs because the solution enables more effective invoice layouts. That's an annual savings of \$216,000.

“We wanted more effective processes and we got them,” says Taylor. “That the Windows-based CostGuard.NET solution delivers that while reducing our costs -- that's icing on the cake.”

Agility Increased to Handle New Products

Access Point Inc. also gains the agility to create and launch new products and services more quickly than ever before, enabling it to respond more promptly and effectively to market needs and opportunities.

CostGuard.NET's product catalog uses a set of wizards to quickly enable new products and service packages with the correct pricing for each of the markets that Access Point Inc. serves.

With 800 products, 700 packages, and 600 pricing plans, customer service personnel could be overwhelmed by the choices they face in serving customers. CostGuard.NET presents streamlined views customized to show only the options available to a customer given his location and other factors -- enabling service personnel to serve customers more quickly, easily, and accurately.

“Because of the Windows-based CostGuard.NET solution, our people can more

easily choose the right products at the right prices for our customers,” says Taylor. “We're in a very competitive industry -- and this solution enables us to be truly competitive.”

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (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. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Info Directions Inc. products and services, call (888) 924 - 4110 or visit the Web site at: <http://www.infodirections.com>

For more information about Access Point Inc. products and services, call (919) 851 - 4838 or visit the Web site at: <http://www.accesspointinc.com>

Microsoft Windows Server System

Microsoft® Windows Server System™ is a comprehensive, integrated, and interoperable server infrastructure that helps reduce the complexity and costs of building, deploying, connecting, and operating agile business solutions. Windows Server System helps customers create new value for their business through the strategic use of their IT assets. With the Windows Server™ operating system as its foundation, Windows Server System delivers dependable infrastructure for data management and analysis; enterprise integration; customer, partner, and employee portals; business process automation; communications and collaboration; and core IT operations including security, deployment, and systems management. For more information about Windows Server System, go to:

www.microsoft.com/windowsserversystem

Software

- Windows Server System™
 - Microsoft® SQL Server™ 2000
 - Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003
- Microsoft Windows® XP Professional
- Microsoft Office Excel 2003
- Microsoft Visual C# .NET
- Microsoft Visual Studio® .NET 2003
- Microsoft .NET Framework 1.1

Hardware

- HP Proliant DL 380
- HP Proliant DL 360

Partner

- Info Directions Inc.

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