Office Products Maker Boosts Innovation, Collaboration; Cuts Cycle Time in Half

ACCO BRANDS

Customer Profile
ACCO Brands, based in Lincolnshire, Illinois, is one of the world's largest suppliers of branded office products, with revenues of nearly U.S.$2 billion. It sells products in more than 100 countries.

Software and Services
■ Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
  − Microsoft SQL Server 2005
■ Windows Server 2008
■ Windows Vista
■ Technologies
  − Microsoft .NET Framework 3.5

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Bill Bucklew, Global Director of Performance Excellence, ACCO Brands Workspace Tools

ACCO Brands, the global leader behind Swingline, Kensington, and other brands, wanted to improve innovation and collaboration and to standardize product life cycle management (PLM), in order to speed time to market, reduce costs, and further enhance product quality. The company adopted a Microsoft® .NET–based enterprise PLM solution from Aras, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, and cut cycle time by more than 50 percent, speeding time to market.

Business Needs

"Because our strategy relies on brand superiority, we need to deliver more innovative products at much higher quality levels than our competitors," says Bucklew, the Global Director of Performance Excellence for ACCO Brands Workspace Tools business; ACCO is the leading provider of office products whose brands include Swingline, Rexel, Kensington, and Day-Timer.

"To continually gain global market share," Bucklew continues, "we have to beat competitors to market with unique products that excite customers. We recognize the importance of having world class innovation,

development, and supply chain practices to drive our growth."

As part of a strategic review, ACCO looked at processes throughout the product life cycle, from new product development through supply chain management, and targeted areas for improvement. Product change processes, document collaboration and control, and supplier corrective actions were among the activities the company wanted to enhance. The product change process, for example, was completely manual, requiring managers on three continents to sign documents, scan them, and fax them to others who repeated the process. On

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average, it took two months for final approval of product changes.

Document collaboration was difficult because of the separate document management systems for each of the company's major suppliers, making it difficult for the company to create a quick, consistent way to access product specifications and other critical documents. With documents sent back and forth through file transfer protocol (FTP) and e-mail, it was easy for inconsistent versions to be circulated, resulting in miscommunications, mistakes, and lost time. Corrective actions similarly depended on phone calls and e-mail messages, making it difficult for the company to quickly implement closed-loop corrections that would eliminate future problems.

What ACCO needed to support its aggressive growth strategy, says Bucklew, was a single, consistent approach to product life cycle management.

Solution

To gain that approach, ACCO considered seven product life cycle management software offerings on 25 factors including ease of use, functionality suite, time to deploy, Web interface, cost, and customizability. The winner was Aras Innovator from Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner Aras. Bucklew says Aras Innovator offered one of the lowest-cost options, was faster to deploy—about 50 percent faster—and was more flexible to extend than other choices, including an Oracle alternative.

The Aras Innovator solution suite gives ACCO "a single version of the truth" of its data. It enables ACCO to communicate specifications and designs worldwide for better global collaboration.

Aras Innovator runs on the Windows Server® 2008 operating system and Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 database software. The enterprise service-oriented architecture, based on the Microsoft .NET Framework, made the solution easy to deploy and makes it easy to upgrade and expand, according to Bucklew. Aras is certified for Windows Server 2008, SQL Server 2005, the Microsoft .NET Framework 3.5, and the Windows Vista® operating system.

ACCO takes advantage of the Aras solution's Web-based user interface to collaborate with suppliers around the world over the Internet. To initiate a process, such as a product change or a supplier corrective action request, an ACCO manager opens a form in a browser window, enters information about the requested change or action. The solution's business process management workflow then notifies appropriate personnel by e-mail, giving them a link directly to the specific workflow activity. The automated workflow streamlines global processes, providing fast online collaboration with closed-loop action item accountability.

Aras Innovator also provides a single, centralized location for product management, eliminating the need to FTP and e-mail documents. Engineers, designers, and manufacturing personnel in Asia, Europe, and the Americas now work from the same controlled files, accessed over a secure Internet connection, rather than creating multiple versions of files—including massive computer-aided design files.

Benefits

ACCO Brands has achieved its strategic business goals of faster time to market and better collaboration for innovation and quality, thanks to its use of Aras Innovator and the underlying Microsoft technologies.

The company is using the solution to reduce product change cycle times—the length of time it takes to implement a change and get the new specification into production—by over 50 percent, a typical savings of more than a month on each proposed change. That means less time spent by ACCO managers and engineers on the change process, and more time spent on strategic functions. It also speeds the time to market for revised products, making product-release schedules more reliable. Overall, time to market for new ACCO products is becoming condensed from what it was before the adoption of Aras Innovator, and Bucklew attributes some of that improvement to the product life cycle management software.

Speed isn't the only benefit that ACCO gains from the Aras and Microsoft solution; greater innovation and product quality are others. The solution provides greater visibility to ACCO managers and engineers into customer issues and supplier quality, giving them quantifiable data to use as a basis for new product innovations to increase customer satisfaction. For example, ACCO recently redesigned its electric staplers, making eight changes in response to issues identified through Aras Innovator, such as changes to the "clinch wings"—the arms in the base of the stapler—to reduce instances of jamming.

"Faster time to market, greater innovation, and superior product quality are absolutely critical to us, and Aras Innovator and Microsoft are delivering those benefits by streamlining and improving our product life cycle processes," says Bucklew. "This is a significant reason we're able to expand our global market share in an increasingly competitive market."

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