

ERP CASE STUDY: SPEAKERBUS GROUP PLC

A successful migration from MAX to Epicor with Force 9 Business Solutions

Company Background

Speakerbus Group plc is a privately owned communications technology developer and manufacturer headquartered in the UK. Established in 1984, Speakerbus has built a solid reputation for supplying worldwide financial, government, security and defence sectors with global voice and video communication solutions. Speakerbus products are installed in over 30 countries; 8 subsidiary offices have been established in major European, Asian and North American cities and the international operation is backed up by a network of 25 agents. Currently, Speakerbus has approximately 150 employees and their most recent annual turnover totalled £16 million.

A specialist in Trader Voice, Push To Talk/Push To Video and Netted Voice solutions, Speakerbus has developed sophisticated products that provide a broad range of communication application capabilities. These range from servicing trading floors located in disparate geographical regions with several thousand positions, to mission critical solutions for command and control centres based thousands of miles away from troops in remote theatres of operation.

IT Background - limitations

For a number of years, Speakerbus had used the MAX ERP system supported by Force 9 Business Solutions. Although the company had benefitted from using the MAX system, they were concerned that the product was no longer being developed by the product owner (Infor), and that its potential for enabling the full integration of ERP with support desk and front office systems fell short of requirements. Speakerbus felt they needed to take advantage of the high levels of integration made possible through the design architecture of modern systems and had determined that they would need a solution based upon Service Oriented Architecture (SOA). As a supplier of mission-critical products, Speakerbus was conscious of the need to maintain and strengthen existing and prospective customer service levels and any new system would have to offer enhanced communications with both customers and suppliers.

The 'way forward' decision

Having made the decision to replace MAX, a Speakerbus team, headed up by Operations Director, Richard Trubger, began evaluating alternative ERP system solutions.



While MAX was definitely on its way out, Richard was still open to continuing to work with Force 9 Business Solutions and included their chosen new generation system, Epicor, in his list of possible replacements. It soon became clear that the Epicor system was a good fit to the Speakerbus criteria - most particularly since the architecture of the system's core functionality was genuinely structured around SOA principles. The team were particularly impressed by the reporting tools and the ease of system customisation which, once the system was established, could be handled in-house thus saving money and elapsed time. Also, the underlying SOA would enable Speakerbus' full integration intentions to be met; the team was especially impressed by the way Excel and Outlook functionality could be enclosed within the Epicor system.

Another major factor in Speakerbus's eventual selection was the availability of Force 9 Business Solutions consultants.



As a result of their wealth of experience in providing and supporting ERP solutions, Force 9 had built up a comprehensive knowledge of Speakerbus business processes and were totally familiar with the MAX product and the usage Speakerbus had been making of it. Moreover, Force 9 had developed a series of 'MAX to Epicor' migration tools that would simplify the successful replication of all business processes by the new Epicor system: a stage that had been determined by the team to be a primary aim of the implementation project.

Implementation

The implementation team, headed up by Trubger and supported by Force 9 consultants led by Director, Derek Sanderson, began the project in earnest in early 2007. Using Epicor-supplied tools, Force 9 handled any necessary customisation and took responsibility for all aspects concerned with 'migrating' the system from MAX to Epicor. Force 9 had invested heavily in developing the data maps, tools and essential skills that would help to minimise the effort involved in the migration process to the new system; master data (e.g. parts, customers, suppliers) and operational data (e.g. sales orders, purchase orders, works orders), were all transferred using these tools.

Also, the 'Service Connect' facility within the Epicor system meant that all data take-on could be achieved via standard Epicor functions with full data validation occurring during the take on process; as with any new implementation, clean data was key. The combination of Force 9 migration tools with Epicor 'take-on' functionality certainly made this exercise far less laborious and time-consuming than traditional approaches. In addition, through the use of Epicor's 'Business Process Manager' facility, specific Speakerbus processes and work flows were incorporated, with relative ease.

The Outcome

The implementation project was viewed by all concerned as a success. But predictably, as with most major IT endeavours, there were some issues: 'for our users' reports Trubger, 'the MAX system had been simple to operate and our staff all understood it well having used it for so many years. For some, the extreme flexibility of the Epicor approach became a complexity in itself as it meant that it was now possible to aim for an *ideal* solution - but that entailed deciding on what was ideal -and that wasn't always simple'. However, in the event, screens were no trouble to fine tune for ease of use and personalized individual user menus were set up as 'favourites' to reflect the activities of each user. Given the opportunity again, Trubger would have invested more time into training users to take advantage of the new system's flexibility: 'although it was the right decision to go for replicating the business processes as the major goal for the implementation phase', he added, 'we could have synchronised this with more intensive user training so that we could then move rapidly towards benefiting from the enhanced functionality embedded within the Epicor product'.

Under Richard Trubger's leadership, and with the managerial support of Force 9, the system 'went live' on time and within the budget Speakerbus had set. Derek Sanderson confirms that the success of the Speakerbus project owed much to the commitment and single-mindedness of Trubger as project manager and that the time spent analysing and developing workflow routines during the pilot stages, helped to minimise the stresses that can occur during the early months of live running. 'Force 9 approached the Speakerbus implementation project in a spirit of partnership', he stated, 'our extensive ERP systems experience enabled our consultants to take a holistic approach to providing a meaningful business solution. Throughout, we saw it as our role to respond rapidly and effectively to the inevitable challenges and queries that arose'.

Beyond replication

Following the attainment of Speakerbus' 'replication' goals, a period of around 3 months 'bedding in' took place as users fully familiarised themselves with every aspect of the new system in 'live' operation. Soon, the situation stabilised to the extent that Speakerbus began work on the other business areas that had, in part, stimulated the adoption of a major new ERP approach; this project continues today. An example of an early application was to improve the visibility of sales order details held by the system; within the Epicor solution, user screens could be organised and customised far easier than had been the case with MAX and this functionality was key to achieving this enhancement. Also many larger customer orders require Speakerbus installation and project management services so that, for the first time, links were established in order that the system could access and display important project information.

Advanced CRM facilities were also key. The Epicor system makes it easy to publish documents into collaboration server software such as Microsoft SharePoint so that throughout the Speakerbus organisation, for the first time, as Trubger states, 'we can achieve a *global* view of our activities with our *global* customers' - important for issuing quotations and for giving visibility to the customer order pipeline. Another current CRM project is also in place to improve the visibility of call logging history thus bringing improvements to customer support levels.

There were several more general features within the Epicor system that, quite simply, made life easier. Crystal reports, used extensively by Speakerbus

within the manufacturing and distribution areas, were found to be extremely easy to launch. Trubger is also impressed with the grid displays within the system - in particular, the way that they can be manipulated by the user to, for example, change sequences without the intervention of IT staff. The ability to launch e-mails from the system is also proving valuable; Speakerbus use this facility to automatically alert accounting staff when non-standard contract terms require modified billing procedures. The new system is also proving valuable within Speakerbus' own product development projects; more advanced engineering revision control procedures within Epicor give greater levels of visibility to change history.

Summing up the new ERP project to date, Richard Trubger is very optimistic: 'the practical strengths of the Epicor system are now becoming very visible', he says, 'and the possibilities for its usage in the future, as we grow the company, are very exciting indeed'.



Force 9 Business Solutions Ltd.,
2 Wheatstone Court
Waterwells Business Park
Quedgeley
Gloucester
GL2 2AQ
+44 (0) 870 410 4149
www.f9solutions.com