

CTB Brings Starwood's Sales Organization Together

Mergers. Consolidations. Acquisitions. Constant change. It's a part of a dynamic economy and, of course, it's spawned by the revolution in technology.

Suddenly managers of information technology have a need to take systems that were never planned or designed to work together and figure out how to morph them into one unified system. The greatest challenge is to accomplish this transformation seamlessly, without impacting the critical functions of the business.

Such was the case when Chris Wichers, vice president of Global Sales Technology for Starwood Hotels & Resorts, was challenged with integrating messaging systems for a recent merger of well-known hotel chains. As Chris says, "It had to be done right, and it had to be done quickly."

Wichers' sales group had a problem, however. Prior to the merger the three hotel chains ran three different messaging standards: one used cc:Mail, another used a centralized MS Exchange server, and the third used distributed MS Exchange servers within each sales office. After the merger, Starwood had ten sales offices throughout the country, but the three messaging systems remained. The decision was made to use MS Exchange on a central server as the corporate standard. However, the transition had to be 100 percent flawless and take place in real time.

The timely delivery of every email message is crucial to Starwood. Many unsolicited invitations to bid on hotel accommodations for large conventions are received via email. The loss of a single message could easily translate into the loss of an opportunity worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue.

In addition, because other office system changes were required, the switch of messaging systems had to happen within 45 days. Wichers interviewed a number of consulting companies, and chose CTB Consulting because of their focus on deliverables, and the fact that they were "very technically put together. CTB had the

self confidence to make commitments."

"I was very keen to have an organization that was going to make a commitment," says Wichers, "because I knew that our situation was going to be very difficult.

We were on a short time schedule. Our IT people were completely consumed in a variety of other projects and were unable to dedicate as much focus on the messaging system as would be needed. In

addition, they could provide only tangential, central system administration assistance. Going in, CTB seemed like a low risk choice. They had a specific track record in this arena. Plus, I detected a real compatibility between us and CTB senior management."

Doing the complete job

CTB completed the project in four phases, one of which included creating images on various laptops and conducting training for each of the global sales people in the 10 offices.

Having come out of sales himself, Wichers confesses, "I think it is enormously difficult to conduct any kind of training for sales people. They are highly distractible; they have a number of issues going at any one time; they have customer demands; and they have internal demands. The ability to get the sales people to focus on a new system is really, really tough."

Wichers predicted it, and he was delighted to see how CTB handled the challenge. He received comments from sales people about how good the trainer was. "Typically," he says, "sales people are onto the next hill and don't have time to discuss previous successes. Our people at Starwood took the time to say that the CTB instructors were very effective, very focused and very helpful."

Wichers adds that CTB could have easily said, "Here's your new mail program. Go sign up at the local PC store, and they'll teach you the basics and get you going.



Chris Wichers
Vice President
Global Sales Technology
Starwood Hotels & Resorts

Business

Starwood Hotels & Resorts is one of the leading hotel and leisure companies in the world with more than 725 hotels in 80 countries, including such renowned brands as Sheraton, Westin, Four Points by Sheraton, St. Regis, Luxury Collection and W Hotels.

Starwood finalized the acquisition of Westin Hotels & Resorts in early 1998, shortly followed by the completion of the purchase of ITT Sheraton.



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CTB Consulting is a private IT consulting company with world-class project management, business process and technology skills. CTB helps organizations that are experiencing rapid change due to Mergers, Acquisitions, Divestitures, Consolidations, or Growth.

Other companies do that. However, Starwood's experience demonstrated why that would have failed. The sales people wanted a lot of hand holding and personal attention in their offices by people who were knowledgeable about what they do."

Anything could have gone wrong "Nothing went wrong," explains Wichers. "We literally went from cc:Mail Wednesday to Exchange on Thursday."

"There were bumps, as there are dealing with any new technology. The software was all new, using a dialer system was new, and Starwood was changing laptops and software at the same time. However CTB was prepared to do everything to make us happy."

Says Wichers, "CTB went through a rigorous due diligence with me several times before they would even accept the engagement. They wouldn't begin unless they could make it an absolutely raging success for me, the IT people, and everybody else. Customers are typically eager to get the proposal, engage the work and move on. CTB wouldn't even send the proposal until they were sure they

understood all the nooks and crannies of the project. It had a lot to do with their success. That is unique — not at all the norm."

Integrated Communication

According to Wichers. "Without exception, good communication between customer and consultant is key." The integration and communication directed from CTB to Wichers was outstanding. Says Wichers: "CTB consultants didn't hesitate to say 'red flag!' They'd interrupt the day to tell us about a potential problem that might never even happen. They weren't trying to scare us, but were trying to be predictive."

"The effectiveness and predictiveness of their communication," says Wichers, "was superb."

"At the end of the day," says Wichers, "it was the smoothest transition I've ever seen occur!" Most telling to Wichers' sense of security in his relationship with CTB, was his confidence in signing an agreement for another project, a network fax solution, immediately on the heels of the one he'd completed. "How much do I like CTB?" says Wichers, "I immediately rehired them. That pretty much says it all."

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