

Knowledge Management Solution Gives Dell a Positive Outlook

Dell Computer Corporation enjoys a reputation for outstanding customer service. This expertise has helped the company become one of the fastest growing computer manufacturers in the world. But customers in the rapidly evolving information age expect even more. To meet its customers' demands for faster, better-informed, and more responsive service, Dell has developed

a host of Microsoft® Exchange™ Server-based knowledge management solutions that has helped the company increase productivity and cut costs while improving customer service.



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The concept of direct customer contact has made Dell Computer Corporation one of the most successful companies of the 1990s. But to carry their success into the next millennium, Dell executives realized they would need to make sure that when customers come into contact with Dell, they receive quick, accurate, knowledgeable service.

Dell has a two-part sales force, an internal sales-support team and a fleet of field sales representatives. Historically, the groups were challenged to keep their information about customers in synch and up-to-date, often resulting in needless duplication of efforts and missed sales opportunities.

Dell also needed a way to respond to customers whether they contacted the company by letter, fax, phone call, or e-mail. Complicating that communication was the fact that the people who needed to respond to customer issues were dispersed among the company's more than 33,000 employees in 33 different countries.

"As Dell and its customer base began to experience explosive growth, it became increasingly difficult for Dell employees to provide high-quality service using non-automated processes," says Arnie Panella, Dell senior manager for global messaging infrastructure. "We needed to create an infrastructure to support development of workflow-based applications that would enable us to efficiently organize, share, and disseminate information throughout Dell, so we could better serve our customers."

Uniting a Disparate Sales Force

By May 1998, Dell had standardized on Microsoft® Exchange™ Server and the Microsoft Outlook® messaging and collaboration client, which the company chose not only for their reliability and scalability, but also as a knowledge-management platform. "Exchange gives us more than a messaging system," says Panella. "It gives us a stable, scalable platform we can also use for collaboration, data storage, application development, and knowledge management."

To help better connect its internal sales support team and its field sales representatives, Dell created a universal contact-management system that sales reps can update and synchronize easily, whether they were accessing the system from an internal desktop computer or an offline laptop. Dell found the solution simple to implement, thanks to Exchange Public Folders on the server side, and Outlook Contacts on the desktop.

Now, with the universal contact repository in place, sales, management, marketing, and executive staff can access any customer's full history, including the most recent activity at a customer site, order status, and relationship or competitive details, all from their standard Outlook Contacts interface. The contact information is stored in Exchange Public Folders, so it is automatically synchronized every time an employee logs on to his or her e-mail account. This system has standardized the customer information corporate wide and united the inside and outside sales forces into a single team because of the timely information sharing. It's also helped with sales productivity because of the ability in Outlook to plan meetings, assign tasks and manage follow up.

Responding to Customers Promptly and Accurately

Dell has also used Exchange to create a workgroup document-management system called Customer Recovery. With this system customer service representatives, who handle incoming customer issues and orders, enter inquiries into a custom Outlook form. The Keyfile Keyflow automated workflow application then automatically routes the form to the appropriate person within Dell. Dell managers can quickly check to see if a customer service representative has officially closed the inquiry or not, and they can track who is resolving issues and how they're being resolved.

"Customer Recovery makes sure that we've addressed whatever issues the customer has raised in a timely and efficient manner," Panella says. "With this knowledge management solution, we make sure that the correct people see the complaint, resolve it, and close the loop with the customer, and that gives our customers a better experience with Dell."

Dell's order-fulfillment and tracking process has also improved. The company receives many orders by fax, and customer service representatives used to write down additional information or customer questions on the actual hard fax copy. These records were very difficult to track, manage, and follow up on. In fact, it could take weeks for Dell employees to find the correct fax order and respond to a customer inquiry.

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Dell IT staff made a number of changes that help make these fax orders more manageable. First, they installed the Omtool Fax Sr. fax server to receive all incoming faxes and send them directly to employees' desktops via Exchange Public Folders. Then, they designed a knowledge management solution that makes it easy for employees to find the order information they need. Now, when a fax order arrives at Dell, an employee enters all the relevant information into a custom Outlook form, and the fax and form are sent to a Microsoft SQL Server™-based database. Any Dell employee can then find the order almost instantly and answer questions or update information.

Business-Critical Results

According to Panella, the document-management system is helping Dell in a few very important areas. The system has cut the material costs of printing faxes and has saved the company for each page not printed. In addition, the time it takes to service requests has been reduced dramatically from a number of days to the number of minutes it takes to service online image retrieval. The document management system has dramatically improved Dell's responsiveness to order inquiries. Because accounts receivable can also find payment information almost immediately, it has helped Dell to come up with the correct document quickly. Because Dell employees can invoice customers more quickly and follow up on payment status easily, Panella considers this a business-critical solution.

In addition to increasing sales productivity, the shared-contact management system has also given the Dell sales force a competitive advantage. If a Dell employee learns that a competitor is courting a Dell customer, he or she can target and quickly contact the appropriate people at the customer site. Then the representative can update the contact information immediately, so other Dell employees know about the situation and the action taken.

Dell has many plans to refine and expand its use of knowledge management solutions. For example, its IT staff is developing reporting tools that will help managers record, track, and analyze the success of systems such as Customer Recovery. In addition, the company is in the process of developing an automated approval system that will reduce the time it takes to fulfill employee requests, whether for new equipment or a change in benefits. Employees will enter their requests in a custom Outlook form that will then automatically be routed to the correct managers for approval.

And the efforts won't stop there. Dell executives have embraced knowledge management as an integral component of running an efficient business. Says Panella, "Very soon after migration, we've gone from using Exchange just as our messaging system, to using it for business-critical knowledge management applications."

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