

a case of being in the right place at the right time?

or can Avanquest Solutions demonstrate that its evolution over more than twenty years has been through a more skilled assessment of market trends?

Twenty years is probably long enough for a business to establish its credentials. Compared with the average start-up company which is likely to disappear before its third birthday, any IT company that can claim to have been in the same line of trade for two decades is due for its corporate long service award. The key phrase there is 'line of trade', of course, given the advances made in the products and technologies it supplies. A vendor which has survived that long will *not* be one that has become locked into solutions which are inflexible and uneconomic to update. The survivors are the organisations which have carefully monitored the trends, espoused responsive strategies and avoided blind alleys down which their less favoured competitors have careered headlong.

Avanquest Solutions would claim to have checked the boxes on most of those counts. Leafing through the IT trade journals of the 1980s, however, there is no reference to be found to a UK business called Avanquest. A case of advertising 'licence', perhaps, or a business that really can trace its roots – if not its name – to that era?

The Sales & Marketing Director at Avanquest Solutions, Mike Rae, filled in a few of the gaps along the company's timeline.

He confirmed that the business had started back in 1987 as Fontware; a prime example of a business which did exactly what its name said 'on the tin'. "It created electronic stationery and logos on cartridges for laser printers at a time when customers had limited options and were looking to print pages in a variety of typefaces and styles."

Evolution of printer technology

Drawing down the text and data for printing from a computer, the early generations of laser printers stored the typefaces and anything else that helped format the output on cartridges which slotted into the printer body. That was where the original Fontware came into the picture with its offering.

The arrival of more sophisticated printers which had no need for an optional cartridge might well have signalled the end of the company's foray into the printer market.

But Fontware's management at the time challenged that wisdom and investigated potential applications for a technology that involved drawing in a data stream and outputting it as a printed image supporting graphics and text and even handwriting.

Entering the fax market

Fax technology fitted the bill perfectly. Only recently launched into the UK office arena, standalone fax machines capable of supporting a busy office were horrendously expensive.

More to the point, most of what they did duplicated the functions of the laser printer: there was clearly scope for integrating fax facilities with an existing laser printer; streamlining the process and reducing capital expenditure for the user.

Adding industry-standard fax software to a laser printer gave Fontware a *raison d'être*. Or to be more precise, not Fontware but *Kommunicate*, the business which evolved a more encompassing role within the rapidly expanding communications



Workflow systems, business process management and environmental impact management overlaying a unified communications environment

arena. The Fontware identity was retained for a while within Kommunicate before that company was taken up by new owners outside the group.

Kommunicate could have taken the same route as many of its erstwhile competitors; picking up a few UK distributorships for high-profile communications kit and moving it out into the marketplace through resellers to earn a margin on every unit sold.

Changed distributor model

Profitability in that 'box-shifting' sector of the UK IT market was about to be squeezed, and Kommunicate would have become a hostage to fortune, hoping that its suppliers would continue to come up with market-leading technology.

Instead, the company focussed its efforts on providing value added solutions, a strategy which helped insulate it from the vagaries of developers.

Were a preferred supplier to change either its approach to product development or its business model, it would be possible to source an alternative while preserving the integrity of the solution.

That policy was maintained during the '90s and into this decade. And the strategy was kept in place when Kommunicate joined the French-owned Avanquest Software group in 1999. Re-branded as Avanquest Solutions in 2004, the UK company retains its focus on the

business-to-business solutions market, while the parent operation – established a quarter of a century ago – sells packaged end-user software.

SMS platform development in-house

With very few exceptions, Avanquest Solutions has not become involved in product development on its own account, choosing to create solutions based on 'best of breed' products. Rae explained that the company had developed an SMS platform which allows its customer base to send SMS text directly. As part of a highly integrated solution, that is a significant value-adding component.

That SMS tool illustrates that Avanquest Solutions is still very much a communications company, but the technology has been subsumed into the solutions it delivers. "Our customers are more concerned with issues such as document lifecycle, business process management and how they process calls through their organisation, for example", Mike Rae observed.

"We support those business requirements with techniques such as unified communications, fax over IP and real-time perfect mirroring of data systems. As the needs of the customers change over time, we are well placed to evolve the solutions which support them."

Reference there to fax over IP highlights the continuing role that fax generally has played in the Avanquest product strategy almost from the start of the operation.

If the statistics quoted on the company's web site are to be taken at face value, Avanquest can claim an impressive customer base. It cites 2,500 clients and 6,000 solutions delivered in the first twenty years. Perhaps more to the point, it claims that many of its clients have stayed with Avanquest over the years even though they may have changed their ownership, identity and business sector.



By 1992, the company had identified the RightFax system from Captaris as capable of making a major contribution to document management and it remains central to its portfolio of business solutions.

The relationship between Avanquest Solutions and Captaris is close, Rae maintains, as it is with other key suppliers of products that Avanquest now distributes. "In some situations, we are seen as their UK service and support organisation. That is valuable if we are to continue delivering solutions to our clients far into the future."

Substantial customer base claimed

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With the Avanquest Solutions workload shared by 100 staff based in three offices, those claims would withstand closer scrutiny. There is the head office in the old city of Winchester which handles the mainstream

'Solutions' business, along with a similar but smaller facility at Stotfold in Hertfordshire. And there is the division down in Plymouth which handles Datawatch Europe, the group's corporate licensing specialist and the distributor of the Monarch report mining tool that we assessed in depth in a previous edition.

We noted at the time that Monarch has been on the market for 25 years, extracting information to order from across a client's information systems. For the type of customer that Avanquest is now addressing, that ability to integrate diverse streams of information can form a key platform within a business services system.

Improved efficiency sought

Customers do not invest in the kind of solution that Avanquest provides as a status symbol: at the very least, they are looking to improve efficiency, which reduces costs and increases the return to the bottom line.

Interest in climate change and the effect that the unnecessary use of resources may have on CO₂ emissions adds a further dimension to the investment strategy of both private and public sector organisations.

Few types of organisation have taken these questions more seriously than the UK local authorities, who have to take a lead in their

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“A combination of workflow systems, business process management and environmental impact management overlaying a unified communications environment produces improvements in efficiency across the organisation.”

communities over the efficient use of resources. Indeed, local government is now being ‘marked’ on its use of energy by the Audit Commission under a procedure known as the Common Area Assessment.

One of the three themes for that assessment is how well an authority manages physical assets, people and technology; in each case checking that good value is being provided to the community which funds it.

In the area of climate change and its implications for local authorities, the assessment will determine whether the organisation is making effective use of natural resources. Specifically, it will be seeking evidence that the organisation

- understands and can quantify its use of natural resources and the main influencing factors,
- manages performance to reduce its impact on the environment;
- manages the environmental risks it faces, working effectively with partners.

The proportion of its business that Avanquest Solutions continues to secure from local authorities – around 40% of the current turnover - would suggest that the company’s solutions meet these increasingly strict criteria for the use of resources and carbon emissions.

Role of partner in managing change

Optimising solutions for their impact on climate change is one of the factors that would appear to have won that business for the company, which sees itself in the role of a ‘partner’ as envisaged by the Common Area Assessment.

The public sector as a whole had been targeted to cut some £21.5 billion from its cost base over three years under the terms of the Government’s 2004 Efficiency Review – the

‘Gershon Report’, named after its principal author, Sir Peter Gershon.

Local authorities had to increase back-office efficiency by reducing costs by 2.5% in each of those years; a challenge for any UK local authority that did not have its affairs reasonably in order.

At least half of the 2.5% had to be real cash savings, the remainder could come from other efficiency gains such as improved productivity. Areas identified for financial savings included procurement, the administration of services such as council tax and housing benefits, and a broad swathe of corporate services. All the cash saved by local authorities can be retained and reinvested into services, or used to keep council tax down.

Tangible results under scrutiny

Mike Rae believes that the level of business secured from local authorities can be traced to the fact that its solutions are intended to achieve tangible yields in each of the areas under scrutiny. “A combination of workflow



Nottingham City Council was the focus for the Nottingham Declaration which triggered local councils’ campaigns of action through the Local Authorities’ Carbon Management Programme of the Carbon Trust. Avanquest Solutions appears to have a real understanding of the councils’ requirements in pursuing sustainability and carbon reduction.

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In our analysis of the RightFax installation at Barnsley Metropolitan Council (overleaf), the objective was to streamline operating procedures across the authority's activities, by replacing fifty fax machines that needed power, maintenance and consumables – and were a source of environmentally harmful ozone.

Measuring results

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"It becomes a way of improving business process, and the benefits increase as further departments are brought into its orbit.



Further information about Avanquest Solutions can be found at www.avanquest-solutions.co.uk or by telephone from +44 (0)1962 835000.

"From routing copies of incoming mail from local residents, to the purchasing department placing electronic orders, information flows are improved, and operating costs fall."

Combining resources

When a company like Avanquest Solutions has weathered the storms of rapid technology change in its sector experienced since its inception back in the 1980s, and demonstrated its understanding of the sectors it serves, there is surely little scope for finding fault with its business model as a solutions provider.

If there were grounds for concern, however, it would be that Avanquest has a constant call out for 'partners'. This is usually taken to be a euphemism for 'resellers', perhaps, and a reminder that the company is at heart an IT distributor who future is dependent on a network of fickle resellers.

Rae was keen to show the other side of the reseller coin, seeing major benefits in working with resellers whose

own experience was complementary to that of Avanquest.

"The typical reseller we might recruit might be a Voice over IP specialist implementing communications solutions for the health sector.

"The ability to integrate RightFax into that solution would strengthen both companies' case while extending our own customer base.

"The process also works in reverse: we could be selling a unified communications solution into a financial institution, for example, and involve the expertise of a reseller with specialist banking systems knowledge - one of our partners has a powerful case management platform, for example."

Longer term potential

In the increasingly competitive world of IT services, it would be easy to see Avanquest's success with local authorities and the public sector in general as a case of being in the right place at a time when all eyes are on operating efficiency and carbon neutrality.

But these demands are not short term: they are ongoing. The fact that its clients do return regularly gives Avanquest the kind of track record which makes the company a logical partner for taking those efficiency measures forward.

And the business model that Avanquest Solutions has adopted – adding value to the systems it distributes - must go a long way to maintaining the financial security of the company.

The odds must therefore be heavily stacked in favour of finding that Avanquest Solutions is being reviewed in these pages around the time of its thirtieth anniversary. §

The demands for sustainable solutions are ongoing. The fact that its clients return regularly gives Avanquest a track record which makes it a logical partner for taking those measures forward.

Offering companies cash grants and tax incentives to invest in key regions of the UK was a tried and tested formula from the end of the Second War almost to the end of the 20th Century. The areas were essentially those which, through changes in their economic infrastructure, were experiencing higher than average levels of unemployment. Clearly, this strategy was felt to work, or the packages would not have been offered by governments of both political persuasions.

But 'inward investment' incentives can create an economic environment that is as fragile as the one they were meant to assist: when the businesses brought into a region in turn suffered any major setback, the impact on the community seemed to be magnified.

Giving a challenged region the wherewithal to start rebuilding its own economic infrastructure is a more flexible approach; one that is better suited to adapt to further changes as they occur without catastrophic upheavals.

Regional approach

The approach has been critical to a region like Yorkshire and The Humber, whose communities owed much of their prosperity over more than a century to a bedrock of coal-mining and steel production.

As the UK economy started its inexorable shift from extraction and manufacturing to services, the English regions most affected by that process had to evolve new working patterns that could carry them forward into a very different economic era.

Fortunately for the five million people who live in that region – the fifth largest of the nine designated English regions –



A change of business process helps reduce Barnsley's carbon emissions

Joining Carbon Trust Programme gives local authorities an opportunity to re-assess their operations on a broader front.

Whitehall did not impose a one-size-fits-all master plan for regeneration. It was recognised that more localised solutions had to be conceived; tapping the distinctive strengths to be found across the towns and cities and rural communities which make up the region.

Rethinking Barnsley

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council is one of the authorities within the Yorkshire and Humber region. Architect and Planner Will Alsop created a 30 year vision for the town – Rethinking Barnsley.

Regarded as a leading modernist architect, this winner of the prestigious Stirling Prize for Architecture takes a holistic approach to his urban designs, extending far beyond the bricks and mortar of the buildings to create what are usually regarded as edgy, forward-looking communities.

As the enabler of the long-term regeneration of the borough, and its quarter of a million population, Alsop was a bold but inspired choice and a clear indication that Barnsley was taking change on all fronts seriously.

Rethinking Barnsley is about creating the ideal 21st Century Market Town; a modern community that provides employment,

culture, the arts, accommodation, leisure, retail and a place to relax, all focused in its town centre.

Responding to challenges

An integral part of Barnsley Council's model for change is an understanding of how the authority and the community it serves should respond to the challenges which have a bearing on their future development.

In practice, those are social, cultural, economic and environmental. Central to the last of those categories is climate change and a strategy for ensuring that the local authority takes an active lead in reducing its own carbon emissions and creating the framework in which the other stakeholders in the community – the residents, the business sector, charities and health, for example - can follow suit.

How well the authority monitors and controls its own carbon emissions will be brought closer into view under the microscope in the year ahead.

In line with new rules for the public sector, its buildings will be rated with a Display Energy Certificate, for example, while the Audit Commission will be using its new Comprehensive Area Assessment to ensure that all English councils

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are delivering value for money across the spectrum of their activities. Progress to sustainability forms parts of that scrutiny.

Nottingham Declaration

Along with some 300 other local authorities in England, Barnsley Council made its start down the sustainability route by signing up to the Nottingham Declaration, a statement of intent by each of those authorities to take affirmative action on climate change.

Without contractual obligations, it is nonetheless seen as a stake in the ground which focuses the mindset of the council and its partners in the community on cutting carbon emissions.

The Nottingham Declaration is regarded by many of the councils who have signed up to it as a stepping stone to the Carbon Trust's Local Authority Carbon Management Programme.

This is a ten-month long sequence of commitment, analysis and training designed to help local authorities like Barnsley turn their good intentions into viable programmes of action over the following five years.

Signing up to LACM Programme

Barnsley Metropolitan District Council was one of the 45 local authorities which joined the Programme in April 2007; the fifth annual batch to have done so.

Many of the 250 councils who have joined the Programme in one of its six rounds to date have used the opportunity to re-assess their operations on a broader front. Barnsley was no exception. When it set about consolidating many disparate offices into a new, purpose built council office within the town, the decision was taken to invest in eco-friendly technology and promote environmental responsibility.

It would be difficult to find fault with Barnsley's response to the climate change. Replacing conventional faxes with their electronic counterpart saves energy, paper and emissions. But the way that the Council has integrated the technology into its 'delivery' process means that it has been able to increase both its operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Streamlining business processes

The Council's 11,000 members of staff use some 4,000 PCs, spread over areas such as social services, education and library services. If the underlying business processes could be streamlined, waste of all kinds could be reduced or avoided altogether – without any loss of quality of service.

One obvious example was in the fax technology that the council had seen grow along with its offices. The 50 fax machines spread through the borough were key to the activities of many departments.

But the standalone technology in place at the time was a large user of paper and a notorious generator of ozone and profligate with energy, notwithstanding the need for 'expensive' carbon-based laser toner or printer inks. There was clearly no role for those machines in the new offices and a 'green' alternative had to be sourced.

Replacing conventional fax

Switching to Xerox Multi-Function Devices (MFDs) integrated with the building's communications network achieved some of the Council's objectives on that front: the MFD can scan, copy and print as its name suggests and the fifty original

faxes only had to be replaced by two Xerox devices on each of the six floors. The scanning facility integrates with the Captaris RightFax management system supplied by Avanquest Solutions, while the devices support the MS Exchange 2003 network and SAP business process management tool. By implementing Captaris RightFax with the Xerox MFD all fax documents are now captured electronically on the RightFax Database for easy retrieval if required.

Users either send a fax directly from their Outlook or SAP client, or from the Xerox MFD if a user needs to fax a paper document. The requirement for stand-alone fax machines is therefore saving costs and improving staff efficiency.

RightFax is also integrated into the SAP system, so departments such as Business Support are able to process documents like invoices and purchase orders within SAP and then distribute them electronically using RightFax to third parties.

In line with 'green policy', an electronic post box has also been set up. All mail is centrally scanned and then distributed automatically using the new Electronic Content Management System to departmental areas.

Response to climate change

It would be difficult to find fault with Barnsley's response to the UK Climate Change Programme. The replacement of conventional faxes with their electronic counterpart certainly saves energy and paper on a machine-by-machine level.

But the way that the Council has integrated the technology into its 'delivery' process means that it has been able to increase both its operational efficiency and effectiveness. This is one Council that will no doubt welcome its Comprehensive Area Assessment when the time comes. §

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