



SCI-NET

What do a company producing polythene packaging and one of the most exclusive kitchen manufacturers in the country have in common? They both have business intelligence. At least they do now, after deciding to partner with Sci-Net to embed ICT into their operations. Mark Reynolds finds out how Duncan Fergusson has built Sci-Net into a market leader and improved their customers' productivity and profits.

"I always knew I wanted to be in business, but just wasn't sure what," says Duncan honestly. Who is? Over 15 years ago he was a financial controller for a successful business, and he decided that the manual bookkeeping that occupied his days was just not the way things should be done. "I decided to computerise an accounts system for my employers, which at the time was a revolutionary move, and the success of that project led other companies to ask me if I'd do the same for theirs." Duncan has also worked as an operations director for a mail order business, which helped him learn about how to manage logistics and manufacturing. "After a few years in business, accounting became the small part of what we did, and it became a lot broader. We moved into managing the whole operational process of our clients' business."

Sci-Net, the company Duncan is now responsible for, has perfected the art of making a business run smoothly. They don't simply talk about accounts software or stock control, they review how a business currently operates and ask how they can make it better using technology. Duncan explains how a new customer might find their approach different to many systems integrators: "We spend time understanding what the customers want and work on a complete solution for them. We don't just implement, train and support – we very often tailor the software to give a 100% fit for our clients' business. Most companies seem to like that, the flexibility to give them really what they need, rather than what a piece of software can do out of the box." To make sure this process is successful, Sci-Net employ a team of full-time analyst-programmers, who do all the development work and code writing for bespoke projects.

A great example of this work is the system designed for Smallbone Group plc. Sci-Net have improved their business greatly using Navision, by Microsoft Dynamics (the business systems side of Microsoft). Navision (or NAV 5.0) is one of two products in which Sci-Net specialise, and according to Microsoft is "a powerful yet cost-effective solution that can be tailored for your company". But what does that mean for a company that has built a brand famous for the most luxurious kitchens on the market? The group is made up of Smallbone of Devizes, Mark Wilkinson Furniture and Paris Ceramics: all successful businesses in their own right, but on different sites, in different countries and with different business needs. The group's directors wanted to gain greater control of how these companies operated and also understand how they compared. They wanted to use Navision to make sure they were doing the right things.

Duncan explains: "Paris Ceramics are a ceramic floor company. They import hundreds of containers of top-quality raw materials that end up being used in kitchens installed by Smallbone of Devizes. The system we have built for them tracks the progress of containers which are being shipped, manages how and where things are stored in their 53,000 square foot warehouse, takes them

through the production process and manages how those tiles are shipped to the customer's site." You can tell that Sci-Net are proud of this one, and rightly so. "It's a global system running across France, America and the UK. They can now analyse every aspect of their business from looking at their most profitable or biggest-selling designer, or re-stocking their most popular ranges. They can even tell who the most efficient and quickest installation managers are!" For me, this sums up what a good ICT project is all about. It allows a business (or, in this case, a group of businesses) to look at all of their systems and processes and use this information to fix problems and improve profits. Duncan calls this "Business Intelligence" and I am starting to understand why...

Smallbone had needed an HR department for a few months but, like every business, were unsure if they could justify the additional expenditure. With the efficiencies that their new ICT system brought them, they ended up with three spare staff in their accounts department. They moved these staff into HR and now are running far higher levels of employee satisfaction as a result. If that is not an intelligent business move, I don't know what is.

Sci-Net do lots of work for the smaller business too, which is very cost-effective and doesn't need any development time. The software they specialise in is very sophisticated on its own and the second package which Sci-Net use is a bit easier to get to grips with for the small to medium sized business. Sage 200 and Sage CRM were recently deployed at United Polythene to great effect. They are manufacturers of polythene packaging products, with accounts and operations in Witney and a manufacturing plant in Liverpool. Sci-Net have recently installed the Sage products for them to cover all of their accounting, sales, operations and production systems across the two sites. United Polythene is a new business, and its founder has worked with Sci-Net on all of his multi-million pound businesses. "He was one of our first customers," recalls Duncan, "and it's great that he has come back to us for his new venture." If a customer calls in and logs an enquiry, the sales team use Sage CRM to manage that interaction and close the order. The order is then put into the Sage 200 system. If they need to buy any stock in to fulfil the order it will do that automatically, or if they need to do a specific production run for someone, that will be kicked off seamlessly in Liverpool. Once the goods are produced, the system will then handle the shipping requirements, manage the accounts and invoicing and – if that wasn't enough – even do credit control after 30 days!

You might run a small business and feel that your operation could be made more efficient by implementing a simple yet powerful accounts package. You might manage a group of companies with a very specific set of mission critical systems that currently don't talk to each other. Either way, contacting Sci-Net could be the most business-intelligent thing you do today.

Contact details on page 78