

Manufacturing



Egemin

Headline

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During its earlier years, the business concentrated on providing engineering solutions in the industrial and electrical environments.

With the arrival of the 80s, it embraced computer technology and established itself as a leading implementer of material handling and process systems, automated warehouse systems, AGVs (automatic guided vehicles) and industrial automation.

Creativity And Technology: Egemin's Approach To Unified Communications

In 1947, the daughter of an Antwerp shipping tycoon persuaded her artist boyfriend, Theo Pomierski, to earn some extra money by turning his hand to repairing ships and, in particular, concentrating on their electrical installation and equipment. From this inauspicious start in Belgium grew a leading-edge international engineering company, Egemin NV, with a penchant for innovation. Inspired by their founder's artistic flair, the company philosophy is epitomised by its motto, "Creativity & Technology" and an ideology expounded by Pomierski: "To understand the importance of the human dimension in business".

While Egemin's human approach is typified by its policy of non-ageist recruitment, its commitment to innovation is widely known. The commitment to innovation is first evident on arrival at the company's new headquarters. An electronic display in front of each visitor's parking space welcomes the arriving guest. Unfortunately success stemming from success with such products has created additional challenges for Egemin. With 50 to 200 of its 400 headquarters-based staff typically working offsite at any one time, Egemin has had to implement radical steps to tackle the problems posed by a large mobile workforce. The solution involves the deployment of a unified messaging system in a copper-less environment with DECT and GSM phones replacing conventional telephone handsets on the desktop, and fibre optics in place of standard network cabling. (The latter proved a particular challenge, to find a supplier whose equipment could handle over 500 fibre optic channels.)

Since its inception over half a century ago, Egemin has grown to over 650 employees across its group of companies and has a turnover of 100 Million Euro. During its earlier years, the business concentrated on providing engineering solutions in the industrial and electrical environments. With the arrival of the 80s, it embraced computer technology and established itself as a leading implementer of material handling and process systems, automated warehouse systems, AGVs (automatic guided vehicles) and industrial automation. Innovation has always been a key factor in the company's success and has given rise to many inventions, including the petrol card. These days, individual projects yield revenues from 25K Euros up to in excess of 10 million Euros. Though they include electrical, fibre optic and security implementations in industrial applications, the main thrust of the business is providing advanced automation solutions for data and physical flows of solids, liquids and unit loads based on own products and technologies together with the integration with ERP systems such as SAP or Baan.

In 1989, Egemin was sold to Sidmar, a steel company under the Arbed umbrella. A synergistic relationship allowed the company to grow at a solid and consistent rate. The next stage in its evolution occurred in 1999 with a management buy out. Immediately plans were put in place to create an infrastructure that would stand Egemin in good stead for the next quarter of a century.

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Quote

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Challenge

One of the biggest problems they had to tackle was caused by the large number of customer site projects. Jan Peirsman, International Purchasing Manager, explained: "It is always difficult to get the right information to the right people at the right time. When on site, our engineers have no voice or fax access. We need to coordinate all messages in one environment."

Coincident with the building of a new headquarters, and spurning traditional thought processes, rather than simply looking for a new PBX, they concentrated on the unification of their communications, identifying a need for a Unified Messaging system that would allow them to stay in touch with their engineers who could be anywhere in the world, from Sweden, to Canada, the USA and Brazil (car seat manufacturer, Johnson Controls). With 80% of corporate information in their staff's heads, knowledge and information management was therefore a key issue that only Unified Messaging could help tap and keep on line.

Originally chosen because Egemin had relevant in-house experience, Novell was the company's networking environment. This naturally evolved into the adoption of Novell GroupWise as the email platform. Nowadays the GroupWise clients are hosted on PCs running anything from Windows 95 (used by admin staff) to Windows NT and 2000 (used by the technicians). Pleased with the platform's exceptional stability, and by the fact that it is effectively virus free, the company needed a UM solution that would integrate seamlessly with it. Not only this, but the solution had to offer centralised management and status tracking - so that when a user manipulated a message remotely, for instance by voice access over a phone, the change in status would be immediately reflected in the inbox. In addition, the solution had to provide fax and SMS capabilities, accessible from both the desktop and by voice line (for instance, sending/routing faxes and email from a mobile phone). Finally, besides requiring complete mobility outside the building, the company also needed this degree of freedom and flexibility inside the office environment as well.

Solution

From the many UM vendors considered, two suppliers were short-listed: the global UM solutions provider, TOPCALL and a German vendor. After a consortium meeting in June 2000, the decision was made to go with TOPCALL for UM, Philips for the PBX, Mobistar as the service provider and 4all NetWorks as Novell support supplier.

The TOPCALL solution offered native integration with GroupWise. It featured status tracking and used directory synchronisation with NDS to populate its user configuration, the requisite for centralised management. Dir Synch also leveraged other TOPCALL features such as automatic inbound fax routing and user dependent coversheets. Unfortunately other vendors could not offer directory synchronisation.

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Overview

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Quote

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Solution (Continuation)

TOPCALL also satisfied Egemin's need for a stable and secure partner that operated on an international level. In addition, Egemin were enamoured by TOPCALL's integrated archive that provided individual access to the massive message store. Herein, every message is indexed by the TOPCALL system, making it possible to do a fast retrieval using search criteria based on recipient, date/time, subject and content. A full OCR capability ensures that even the content of inbound faxes can be searched. The addition of the archive allowed Egemin to overcome a recognised problem where, some messages sent on site by engineers went missing. With UM access to their mailboxes from any of the more than 250 PC's and laptops provided by the company, engineers could now send and receive through a centralised system, with a centralised archive: therefore no more lost information or missing messages.

In this new system, GroupWise is a user's window to the world, with everything placed in the inbox, from DDI faxes, voice mails and SMS messages, to letters scanned in by secretaries. Conversely, a GroupWise user is able to send not just emails, but SMS messages (perhaps a service technician sending a component number to an engineer) and faxes (usually a document written in Word, using a standard Word template). IT Manager, Gert Vanden Bergh, added: "This means at last we have no more fax personnel. We no longer have to walk up to her/him and give our fax, and wait for a written report later. We can get the right things to the right place at the right moment."

The 4 fax machines (2 inbound / 2 outbound) and 70 printers from their old building have been ditched in favour of 20 multifunction devices which are capable of faxing, copying, scanning and printing. These machines are connected to the company's fibre optic network. All outbound faxes are redirected to users' inboxes for onwards delivery (and archiving) through the TOPCALL UM platform. This ensures that each fax is preceded by a cover sheet, which includes a disclaimer and the Egemin logo.

A test system was installed in the old building in November 2000. In the middle of February 2001, the equipment was dismantled and relocated to the new headquarters. Two days later it went live, a big bang changeover with over 500 users brought online immediately. Over the next few months a few teething problems arose. In particular, there were issues concerning lack of functionality with the call attendant, but these were quickly addressed. On another occasion, voice access failed and it could only be reactivated after Novell applied a patch to GroupWise. Since the end of April, the system has been running smoothly. Egemin Managing Director and CEO Donald Pans states, "We are more than satisfied with the TOPCALL solution; we are delighted!"

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Quote

Since the system has gone live, the engineers now effectively and efficiently handle the hundreds of faxes and several thousand emails that pass through the company in the course of a day.

In addition, both customers and suppliers alike compliment Egemin on the quality of their faxes. Because the documents are maintained in the digital domain, they avoid all of the typical analogue fax-machine problems such as striping and skewing.

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Result

Perhaps the only negative now is that some faxes still come in to Egemin's centralised fax number. They are placed in a distribution queue that is only checked twice a day. The net result is that some faxes take longer to reach their intended recipients. However, it is only a short-term issue. The ongoing re-direction of fax messages via DDI numbers has nearly eliminated it. IT Manager, Gert Vanden Bergh, confirms, "We have investigated everything and every fax is being delivered."

From the GroupWise client, TOPCALL's native integration ensures that both inbound and outbound message handling is intuitive. Since the user is already familiar with the client interface, he/she can easily adapt to the additional functionality offered through UM. With such a mobile workforce, it has been difficult to assemble groups for training. Instead, Egemin has used both the concept of teach the teacher and its intranet to disseminate information, backed up by two "to-the-point" pamphlets, a 10 page A4 guide covering the mail client and a 20 page A5 guide covering voice access.

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The most inspirational aspect of Egemin's design for mobility is arguably the elimination of telephone handsets from the desktop. The only conventional devices in the company's new headquarters can be found in reception. Those users that aren't outside the building have DECT phones on their desktops. All else – some 70% of the workforce – have Nokia GSM mobile phones. Within approximately 1 km of the building, all calls are treated as internal with no call fee; beyond the 1 km perimeter, normal company mobile tariffs apply. This means that Egemin can apply the "one number principal," where everyone in the company has their own individual and unique point of contact. It follows them wherever they go, whether inside or outside the building. With a core availability time of 8:00 to 17:30, it is down to an engineer to decide his availability outside these hours. Jan Peirsman, International Purchasing Manager, explains, "Service contracts may necessitate longer hours. In that case it is necessary to stay available. In other cases it's every body's freedom to be available out of normal business hours, but you must have the right to say no."

The implementation involves a TOPCALL Unified Messaging system providing an interface between GroupWise, the messaging media (SMS, fax) and the Philips PBX. Philips' SMA (SOPHO Mobility Access) means that the GSM can access the PBX to give commands to the PBX.

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Summarization

Although Egemin operates in niche markets within the pharmaceutical industries, food, beverage, (petro)chemical and metal industries, the competition is big.

The Company feels that the philosophy instilled by its artist founder helps them to gain competitive edge.

Jan Peirsman summarizes: "We try to differentiate ourselves with creativity and technology."

Certainly by deploying a unified messaging and mobility enhancing solution provided by TOPCALL, Philips and Mobistar places Egemin ahead of the competition.

Result

When the workforce were first advised that this would be the way forward, many were concerned with the health problems arising from such an extensive reliance on mobile phones. However, these fears were eased by an EMC / Radiation expert who gave an informative presentation and talk on the subject. Egemin now has its own cell installed within the new building. The three floors, each larger than a football pitch, are covered by a network of 25 repeaters. At 20-40 milli Watts, power is therefore very low. This means that consumption by phones is also greatly reduced and therefore battery life is significantly extended.

With a predictable monthly charge for calls made within the building and external calls charged at a slightly more expensive (albeit reduced) mobile tariff, isn't this solution costly? Jan Peirsman, International Purchasing Manager, disagrees: "What is better, a call costing two euros... or not reaching someone to fix a problem on site which can cost thousands of euros in production losses for the customer?" There are also the intangible benefits, such as being able to easily locate someone. The time lost in trying to contact a colleague on all his different numbers or finding him in all his different places costs far more than an actual phone call.

Future

Egemin has several other offices in Belgium and imposes an international presence with subsidiaries in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, the UK and USA and many service points all over the world. Though the initial scope of the solution only covers the headquarters in Antwerp, the company intends to integrate the rest of the group by using IP connections. As a one-stop-solution partner (an extremely important consideration as far as Egemin is concerned), TOPCALL also has branch offices in each of these countries. This means a full deployment can be implemented by local, dedicated TOPCALL engineers. For Egemin, having a partner familiar with this scale of project and with creditable international references means they can be assured of a successful deployment. After summer, the company will incorporate Siebel into its unified system, wherein a user's GroupWise mailbox will deliver voicemails and faxes into his Siebel client. Later this year, the company will rollout text-to-speech so that emails can be read out over the phone to mobile workers. These two factors also convinced Egemin that the TOPCALL product provides a suitable platform to grow and adapt with the needs of the business. The solution easily integrates with any new technologies deployed by Egemin and helps the Company achieve its overall ambitions: to become market leader in the area of technological expertise and to be quoted on the stock market in the next two to three years. Although Egemin operates in niche markets within the pharmaceutical industries, food, beverage, (petro)chemical and metal industries, the competition is big. The Company feels that the philosophy instilled by its artist founder helps them to gain competitive edge. Jan Peirsman summarises: "We try to differentiate ourselves with creativity and technology." Certainly by deploying a unified messaging and mobility enhancing solution provided by TOPCALL, Philips and Mobistar places Egemin ahead of the competition.