VAI PREVAIL 2020 CONFERENCE USHERS S2K ERP "ONCLOUD"

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VAI is a long-standing, independent, mid-market provider of enterprise resource planning (ERP) software for the distribution, manufacturing, retail, and service sectors. With specific ERP solutions for companies in the hard goods, food, and pharmaceutical industries, VAI currently has over 1,500 companies using various versions of its flagship S2K Enterprise suite. Those companies range from $20 million to $11.5 billion in annual sales.

VAI is headquartered in Ronkonkoma, NY, with additional locations in Orlando and Miami, Florida, Chicago, Illinois, and Oroville, California. The vendor also maintains a domestic and an international presence through resellers, especially in the regions where it does not sell directly.

Enter VAI S2K Enterprise 6.2
VAI, which was founded in 1978, recently held its jubilee 25th user conference, Prevail 2020, in a remote online manner this year due to the pandemic. At this virtual customer conference, the vendor unveiled the newest version of its S2K Enterprise solution, 6.2. The new ERP software release offers much needed cloud and mobile capabilities. These new capabilities better enable the remote work necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

S2K Enterprise 6.2 also features an updated user interface (UI) and new innovations around Warehouse Management, Supply & Demand Planning, Mobile Apps, and Analytics (see Figure 1). The solution also enhances integration between Marketing, Sales Force Automation (SFA), and e-commerce applications to enable customers to stay resilient in the new normal.

VAI is a mobile software developer for iOS and Android, and also develops the backend for S2K Enterprise. In addition to using OEM version of IBM Cognos for business intelligence (BI) and reporting, VAI uses OEM version of HCL Digital Experience (formerly IBM WebSphere) portal for commerce, OEM version of Rocket Software for middleware, Active Campaign for marketing automation, Configure One for more complex configure, price, quote (CPQ) capabilities, and Verifone for credit card processing and Point of Sale (POS) solutions.

New "On Cloud" Branding Underscores Transitioning to Cloud ERP
Along with the latest enhancements to S2K 6.2, VAI introduced its new "OnCloud" branding to reflect the transitioning "from ERP on premise to cloud ERP" the vendor is seeing in the field. The new "OnCloud" branding will be added to all of VAI's ERP products: S2K Enterprise OnCloud, S2K for Food OnCloud, and S2K for Pharma OnCloud.

VAI's cloud technology is composed primarily of IBM, Lenovo, VMware, and several other

sources of technology. The vendor owns its own cloud data center. All of VAI's cloud architecture is multi-tenant but each customer gets its own virtual isolated images including full High Availability (HA) and Disaster Recovery (DR) solutions.

There is a definite uptick in cloud business and interest in cloud storage as a result of the pandemic. COVID-19 shed light on the pros and cons of both on-premise and cloud storage, but cloud adoption offers more flexibility, which is what many companies need in this landscape.

With on-premises equipment, an essential worker still had to go into the office or facility and check it every day, putting that employee at risk. Additionally, on-premises storage is difficult to manage for businesses that have several office locations or customers scattered across the country, making cloud storage ideal in such situations.

At the end of the day, the on-premises versus cloud debate comes down to the specific industry. Government agencies, heavily-regulated enterprises, and multi-national companies traditionally lean towards on-premises equipment because there is less risk of data breaches

or stolen information than can occur via public cloud. The decision will differ from one business to the next. About 10% of VAI's customers run S2K Enterprise in the cloud, and this percentage is increasing every year.

VAI's Veteran CIO Discusses the "New Normal"
To discuss all this, we spoke with Kevin Beasley, CIO at VAI, who has been with the company for over 30 years. Beasley oversees the corporation's technology strategy in conjunction with product development and the internal information technology (IT) initiatives that support the goals of the company. He has decades of ERP, Supply Chain Management (SCM), and Warehouse Management System (WMS) consulting experience along with extensive experience in the IT space. Kevin is also a key presenter at VAI conferences and events, and serves as a leading source for media and PR relations.

TEC: What have you noticed are the most urgent needs from your customers, based on what they have been asking you for help with since the onset of the pandemic?

KB: In the beginning, many companies were taking best

guesses as to what the "new normal" would look like and putting projects on hold until they had a better grasp. VAI worked with customers in the beginning to establish work from home, as many were not set up for that type of environment. We were also asked to provide advice and counsel focused on business continuity and keeping operations running amidst the chaos.

As time has progressed during the pandemic, customers' questions have been geared towards the web, whether as a way to communicate or sell products. Our customers have been pushed to conduct business differently, shifting towards mobile and e-commerce sales as their primary means of business. On the communication end, workers had to be able to use mobile apps to do their jobs even if they weren't tech savvy. Businesses need solutions and software that makes it simple for employees to learn and work on such apps.

TEC: What particular VAI solutions and capabilities have come in handy to your customers these days and how?

KB: Digital tools, such as e-commerce, and digital marketing solutions, such as S2K Marketing

Cloud, have allowed companies to continue conducting business while their physical locations were closed. These tools were the most helpful for VAI's customers.

S2K Marketing Cloud helped customers expand business and drive traffic to their websites, ultimately boosting demand generation. Whether ordering, invoicing, receipts, inventory levels, or tracking deliveries, all of it could be done and controlled via VAI's S2K Enterprise Portal software, which was the number one for customers.

Our number two (and now becoming more prevalent), are VAI's analytics solutions. As our customers are now enabled to conduct business online and remotely, they are relying on S2K Analytics for analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), and reporting for predictive analytics and historical analysis. During the pandemic, traditional planning ahead and analyzing past sales to forecast supply and demand became extremely difficult, and customers needed to make preparations based on that data and what AI factored into new "what if" scenarios to better predict during these times.

Many companies did not previously realize the value of analytics and metrics, so this capability will continue to rise in importance for business leaders. To that end, S2K 6.2 focused on the enhancements to Info-Center, Updated Health Check (see Figure 2), New Dashboards, S2K Analytics Reports, and more.

TEC: Other than analytics, has any buzzword-sounding technology tool lent itself well to dealing with this crisis?

KB: I would say the most used "buzzword" tool during this crisis was really whatever tool companies had that they could use right away. Organizations had to respond quickly using whatever technology they already had deployed, or else they had to accelerate adoption of this technology. For example, if a company already used AI-driven predictive analytics or IoT technology in the supply chain, these tools became extremely crucial to the operation. For other companies—the ones who did not already have these kinds of tools—they may be at a significant disadvantage.

The most relied-upon solution during this time is business intelligence (BI) and analytics. Using BI tools to model the current and future state of the market has become even more impactful as companies have had to navigate changes in real time. Without the utilization of data to create these models and drive business decisions, organizations would be lost on what next steps they should take to survive the pandemic and avoid economic fallout.

Adapting to the Pandemic and Ascertaining the "Next Normal"
TEC: How have your more agile customers adapted to this pandemic?

KB: Many of our customers in industries such as food, retail, and janitorial supplies had to pivot their strategy just to survive as well as react to the demands of COVID-19. Food suppliers, who typically supplied restaurants, made a shift to grocery stores, and janitorial supply companies who typically supplied school districts or offices, changed their focus to supplying hospitals and health systems.

To successfully make these change and enter new markets, these suppliers needed sophisticated data-driven tools and supply and demand planning to identify where the need was and quickly ramp up operations in response. By having these tools

in place prior to the pandemic, VAI customers were able to quickly lean on S2K Enterprise to transition to new markets and survive.

Other customers might have not have had to change markets but they had to operate remotely for the first time ever. Without a modern technology stack, such as an astute ERP solution, many of these organizations wouldn't have had the tools in place to ensure secure access to business applications and also work with warehouse operations remotely. Initially, we saw the biggest challenges come from the sudden need for working remotely, but now organizations have found the ability to sustain this remote working environment on an ongoing basis.

TEC: Once the pandemic subsides or goes away completely, do you think manufacturing, distribution, and retail companies will rethink their supply chains for the future's "next normal?"

KB: Some organizations will never go back to the old normal. Employees from the C-suite all the way down to hourly workers have learned to create new ways of operating with what they need and what they can do without. From remote work flexibility to new sanitation protocols when on premise, operations may be altered for a long time to come.

Supply chains have accelerated the adoption of data-driven tools and have changed strategies to accommodate remote processes such as providing the ability for remote warehouse management and order fulfillment. Changing consumer buying patterns have forced some industries to handle a huge increase in demand, such as in CPG (consumer packaged goods), while other industries have seen a decrease and have had to pivot to different markets, such as in the food sector.

Companies need not revert back to the way things were before. They can instead build on what they've learned or deployed so ast o ensure they will be prepared for any future crisis or situation. It's become evn clearer that organizations that already had the digital capabilities to handle quick changes or disruptions in business are the ones that have seen the most success during this challenging time. Other organizations should learn from these leaders.