

How cloud ERP helps ambitious businesses move fast, grow fast

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By Phil Wainewright October 19, 2017



Ambitious businesses today understand the role that technology can play in advancing their progress. The right business platform will help streamline operations while providing the flexibility and scalability to support agile, rapid growth — to move fast and grow fast.

This is a market that cloud ERP vendor NetSuite knows well and at its EMEA conference this week in London I was able to meet with two customers that have just gone live on the system. Their stories

illustrate some of the key elements that a business system like NetSuite can contribute to growing ventures.

Cloud ERP in 15 weeks

Both companies had completed implementing NetSuite and gone live with the cloud ERP system in just three-and-a-half months, or around 15 weeks. That's an impressive timeline for a full-blown business system, but these businesses can't afford to stand still.

Design-conscious **home fashion label Buster & Punch** was already using Brightpearl cloud ERP in its UK operations, but chose to replace it with NetSuite so that other locations across Europe, Asia and the US are all on the same system. It is using NetSuite to track customers and orders all the way from lead management and sales through to production and delivery, and integrates into an existing Magento e-commerce platform. This was a lot to achieve in such a short time, says CEO Martin Preen:

// We started the implementation about three and a half months ago. And we went live globally three weeks ago. It was intense.

BUILT/ is a new venture that aims to **reinvent the traditional builder's merchant** by offering transparency on price and availability, plus on-demand collection from a highly automated depot. The company hadn't even begun its NetSuite implementation when managing director Nick Thomas went on stage at the vendor's SuiteWorld conference in late April to talk about why the

company had chosen the platform. By September it had not only gone live with the software, but had also completed all the other preparation required to open its first branch, as Thomas explains:

// We weren't able to really start working with NetSuite until we had all the data in place. The range and all the product information didn't get constructed completely until May. So we've launched an entire set of business systems in just over three-and-a-half months of having access to the data.

It's been an enormous amount of work across several business-critical work streams, all flying out into the opening in September. We built the entire systems infrastructure, all the business processes, developed all the supply chain relationships, brought the stock in, raised the branch — a brand new format [on] a 60,000 square foot site. We've done all of that on time, on schedule.

A single source of data

In today's fast-moving business environment, companies don't have time to wait around for information to become available. Efficient, responsive processes demand real-time access to reliable data. This is one of the big advantages of having everything in a single cloud-based system.

Buster & Punch had taken on private equity investment in April to fuel expansion, including a planned roll-out of new stores, so needed to get a

grip on processes and oversight. Prior to putting in NetSuite, there had been very poor visibility across the business, with locations outside of the UK running on spreadsheets. “It was a mess,” says Preen.

// We wanted something that would bind everything together without just having loads of interfaces and we decided for NetSuite.

To be honest the implementation highlighted a lot of weaknesses in our own business around data.

Just something as simple historically of us putting [work] orders on our Asian entity. Without having lots and lots of spreadsheets with tabs coming back and forth it was very difficult to see where we were.

For BUILT/, a single, real-time view of all the customer records, stock records and transaction data is central to a business model that’s built on transparency and on-demand fulfilment, as Thomas explains.

// At the heart of it was mastering all the data. It was having all the information in one place so we could guarantee a consistent range, consistent service.

Once we had a system that could hold all that information centrally and was configurable enough, we then built a delivery model which is scheduled.

[We have] a click-and-collect model in which you can pick your time slot. Walk-in processes are very quick. Customers can drive into the branch, colleagues can approach the customer with a mini iPad device and place an order directly into the system with live stock availability. The sales order will go immediately into picking, so it's very swift.

Consistent, repeatable processes

As well as giving everyone reliable access to shared data, high-growth firms need the stability of using consistent, repeatable processes across the business. Although the flexibility to innovate quickly is also important, that agility depends on everyone knowing what's expected of them at any given time. This was an important part of Buster & Punch's decision to go with NetSuite, says Preen:

// We've grown through innovation. But we've needed to partition that from business-as-usual and have those processes better defined.

The company has sales and warehousing at several locations in the UK, US and Scandinavia, a retail outlet in Stockholm, manufacturing in Asia and subcontractors in Eastern Europe. It encourages its designers to work virtually. It recently launched a new venture in China and has plans to open new retail outlets in London, Los Angeles, New York, and other European cities. It's important that everyone can access the cloud-based system wherever they

happen to be working, and as new people come on board, that they easily understand what they need to do. That's increasingly important as the company expands, says Preen.

// We've grown headcount four times in the last two years. When you start off small, you're relying on a few individuals to do everything, who know it all. When all of a sudden you're growing, you're in different locations, new people come on.

The old guard still want to hold on to their bits to a certain extent. The new people don't know what the process should be.

So a big driver for me with this technology was, we will define those processes, we will define those roles, so that at least then we know that people coming in, they know what they've got to do for the business-as-usual.

No limits on growth

The final element that these ambitious businesses look for from their cloud ERP system is the ability to support growth and change. Scalability and flexibility were important factors in BUILT's choice of NetSuite, says Thomas.

// It's a cloud-based, software-as-a-service solution. That was appealing, that we could scale the business without needing to re-platform.

It was really the single source of all the

data that was important, so that we could design customer journeys that suited our target customer. But then also the degree to which NetSuite is adaptable, extendable and flexible allows us options today to enhance the customer journey in the right way but also many options in the future.

For now, the venture is fine-tuning its operations and preparing a foundation for further growth. A second branch is planned for February and then a third in early summer.

“ We’re still very early days. We’re a month or so into operation. But a major milestone has been achieved in terms of converting something from paper six months ago. We’ve physically been able to manifest all the systems, the business processes, the format and the supply chain. so it’s all working now. Now we need to discover the extent to which it will be appealing to customers.

It’s really just the start of the journey. We’ve got a lot of really exciting ideas to keep us at the forefront of the evolution of the market. We want to drive that shift.

The way the trade behave today is kind of accepted as the norm. Nobody’s really brought an Amazon Prime style model to them. I think the challenge now is communicating, in the areas that we operate, that we offer that potential.

My take

There are many more enterprises like these two that show a real appetite to create new markets and try out new business models. A few years ago, the cloud model was still a difficult sell but now business leaders increasingly understand why it's well suited to help them achieve their goals.

That creates a market for cloud ERP that NetSuite is eager to address. To meet that demand, its parent Oracle is funding a big expansion in NetSuite's sales teams, partner channel and localization efforts across large tracts of Europe and in other regions. The timing is propitious and there certainly seemed to be a positive buzz at this week's event in London.

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