Making the Move to Zuercher Suite: A Critical Choice.

Knowing that you're not happy with your current public safety software vendor is one thing. But taking your business to a new company is not a decision to be taken lightly. That's exactly the situation that three agencies in the Black Hills of South Dakota were facing in 2012.

The Rapid City Police Department, Pennington County Sheriff's Office, and Pennington County 911 had been using a software system that had underperformed since its installation in 2006. The agencies put their trust in a software vendor that had never followed through with promises -- and now was asking for even more money for upgrades. Replacing the software system was necessary, but there was more than just dollars on the line.

"In my eyes it was do or die. I knew if we flipped the switch and it didn't work, we'd lose all credibility as a command staff," said Captain James Johns, a veteran of the Rapid City Police Department with nearly two decades on the force. "I had no faith in any records management system. There would have been a huge price to pay if this failed."

Case Study: Zuercher Suite Transition

For these three agencies, the challenge was to find a software system that:

- Performed all the functions needed for every area of every agency. They needed a product that delivered for CAD, RMS, JMS, mobile, administration, civil service, reporting, and more.
- Worked reliably without failures, downtime, or upgrade issues.
- Was user friendly-enough that employees would buy into the process because it made their work better.
- Came with training, configuration, and an implementation process that prepared both the software and staff that would use it.
- Had real support and ongoing improvements, even after the sale.

Their Past Experience

Computer technician Rhonda Fairbanks at the Pennington County Sheriff's Office was dealing with more than 200 open support requests that just didn't get fixed. Every time there was an upgrade, 30 or 40 more problems would surface. By the last few years of their contract, the software vendor would meet weekly with the agencies. And still problems didn't get solved.

"'Workaround' became our biggest term because we had to work around everything," said Fairbanks. "We had stability problems. Restarting the server was a weekly thing. And the jail was going crazy that everything went so slow from step to step. It quadrupled the time for bookings."

Priscilla Edwards, records supervisor for the Rapid City Police, was drowning in paper because their records management system just didn't

SUMMARY

AGENCIES
Pennington County Sheriff's Office,
Rapid City Police Department,
Pennington County 911

AREA SERVED
2,784 square miles

POPULATION
105,700 year-round,
2 million tourists annually

EMPLOYEES
423

PRODUCTS
Complete Zuercher Suite System

deliver. Servers crashed and the backup was paper forms. Running statistical reports was more than the system could take.

"The paper was piling up. The work just continued to grow," said Edwards. "I couldn't provide reports to the public or help people over the phones."

Edwards, who was part of the team looking for the next software vendor, wanted a truly paperless system and reliable support. But more than that, she wanted a vendor who wouldn't say "yes" to make a sale. "We did not want to be oversold or under-delivered after being promised great things."

Thorough Deliberations

As part of a two-year decision-making process, the agencies looked at a variety of software companies. They were impressed by a demonstration of Zuercher Suite and its contemporary architecture with one database, one application, from one vendor. After seeing the software in a sales setting, their decision-makers took their research to the next step, visiting a large agency in Louisiana that had used Zuercher Suite for several years.

"I was convinced after seeing the software in action," said Edwards. "When you see an agency through and through use a system and they're happy with it, you know what you're getting into."

Not everyone was on board at first. Pennington County 911 Deputy Director Ted Rufledt, Jr., joined his agency in 1990. In the years since, he'd seen his system grow from dispatching for two agencies to 57 and had used seven different CAD software systems. He knew that the police department and sheriff's office were highly unhappy with their current software. But he had no desire to move to something new. He was satisfied with the software system he had for CAD and was concerned about the possibility of signing on to use a software that couldn't handle his department's needs.

"Every time we outgrew what we had, we needed more features, more functions," said Rufledt. "I was afraid that we were going back to a single agency system. I didn't want to go backwards when we needed to go forward."

A Real Implementation Process

After the decision was made, the difference between Zuercher Technologies and other vendors was clear from the start: beginning with data conversion.

Retired Pennington County Corrections Sergeant Don Atkinson, now an administrative assistant with the Western South Dakota Juvenile Services Center, had been through data conversion before, but this was different. Atkinson said that Zuercher Technologies staff took time they needed to discuss how the agency actually used their old system before data conversion began.

"It went so smoothly. I couldn't have been happier. From the beginning we could find the data and pretty easily convert it into the system," said Atkinson. "We're ACA accredited and undergo an audit every three years. We have to build files showing data on 437 different standards we have to meet. We needed to be able to find the documentation needed to show our compliance with these standards. With Zuercher we have that capability."

Throughout the Business Practice Review (BPR), formal meetings between key agency staff and the Zuercher Technologies project team, a foundation was laid that helped create focus going forward, said Rufledt. For the dispatch center, it was important to make sure that the project team knew why certain new features of the software specified in the contract had to be operational. Zuercher Technologies staff really spent the time learning what and why things needed to be done.

"When you're doing technical stuff, that's how it has to work. There's an art to it. It was a good process," said Rufledt. "It gave us a chance to really sit down with the key people and go over everything."

Johns was worried going into the implementation process, after spending years of wasting money on a RMS that hadn't worked. What he discovered was that Zuercher Technologies stood behind the product and really worked with his agency to think through their workflow before the software came in. Staff were empowered to really decide how to configure the system to follow the processes they wanted, instead of working the way the software made them work.

"Those meetings were critical. I sat in the back of those rooms and watched our team work and interact with the Zuercher staff. They were learning," said Johns. "I watched as our team bought into this system. I watched as a sergeant said, 'now I get it' and 'now we'll be able to do these things.'"

After the Go Live

When the agencies went live with Zuercher Suite in 2013, they went into it with a comfort level because of the training and the user-friendly nature of the software, said Edwards. Since the software shares one application and one user interface, once staff learned how to use the basics, they could do anything they needed to do.

"Once we taught somebody one part of it, they could learn the rest. It really is a system that lends itself to being self-taught," said Edwards. "It's such an easy system to use. There's no comparison to anything else."

Immediately, the system worked in a reliable way. Many of the data entry and catch-up work that Edwards' staff had been doing manually was no longer necessary, simply because the system wasn't going down. Other labor intensive tasks were made more efficient by the report generator and the creation of custom forms and custom modules. In fact, the agency has been able to gradually replace several records staff positions, moving employees into other jobs elsewhere in the department where they were needed.

IT staff really don't have much to do anymore, when it comes to the system, says Fairbanks. Software updates are a breeze, she says. Instead of spending her time trying to patch a failing system, the computer technician spends her time building new custom modules to make their system even more efficient.

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CAPTAIN JAMES JOHNS
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"I love that freedom. We're actually getting rid of the paper stuff," said Fairbanks. "We're doing assessments with our staff to see what forms and spreadsheets they're using on a daily basis and we're replacing them."

Johns said he's no longer "down" on RMS. He now sees his Zuercher Records software as a valuable tool, something that can help officers get information right away. They do their reports faster and don't waste time with duplicate steps. Jail booking, statistical gathering, and even just obtaining records is quicker and more accurate.

"We're getting real bang for the buck," said Johns. "Officers are only spending a fraction of the time they used to. There's tons of little efficiencies and little details we get right. It all adds up to huge savings for the agency and ultimately the taxpayers of the city."

Rufledt said that after all of his concerns about the quality of the CAD system he was getting, he'd say what he has today is better than the system he had with their previous vendor. His Zuercher CAD has everything he used to have, plus run cards that automate processes for his dispatchers, better GIS data in mapping, and a SMS paging to cellphones system. He had been concerned that Zuercher Technologies couldn't handle large, multi-jurisdictional systems, but that's obviously not the case, he says.

"We're a successful example, proof that Zuercher can handle a larger agency," said Rufledt. "If our software does what it's supposed to do we are happy. And I am happy."

Rationale

The quality of the Zuercher Suite software, and the process Zuercher Technologies uses to bring agencies online and support them after the go live, has changed public safety software from a headache to a crime fighting tool for the Rapid City Police Department, Pennington County Sheriff's Office, and Pennington County 911. The agency was able to save money, add new efficiencies, and give their staff a system that everyone genuinely enjoys using.

"If you're looking at changing your system, Zuercher needs to be what your agency ought to look at," said Atkinson. "Getting this system was one of the best moves this city and county has done in the 20-some years I've been part of this. I would highly recommend it to anyone."