

Industry > Retail and hospitality

SOLUTION SUMMARY

Industry

Retail and hospitality

Company Profile

Zone Labs provides a range of wellness products, including foods, dietary supplements, and a skin care line. The company has 40 employees and is based in Danvers, Massachusetts.

Scenario

Zone Labs was running a mix of unsupported, open source software on Linux, which the company deemed incapable of supporting future growth.

Solution

The company rebuilt its IT environment on Microsoft® software, including core net-working and directory services, messaging and collaboration, an enterprise data store, and a comprehensive business management system.

Benefits

- Improved business capabilities, including warehouse management
- Increased user productivity through automated inventory and shared folders
- Improved manageability
- Enhanced security and reliability thanks to automated updates and backups

Software Used

Microsoft® Dynamics GP Standard

Microsoft Business Solutions Partner

Paragon Software Solutions, Inc.

Burlington, Massachusetts

www.pssusa.com

Wellness Product Company Switches from Linux to Windows Server to Support Growth

"There's a huge benefit in having an integrated infrastructure, business application, and software development environment. It provides a level of simplicity and agility that you just can't get with Linux."

- Carl Norloff, Senior Vice President of Technology, Zone Labs

Zone Labs, known for its Evidence Based Wellness products, had an unsupported IT mix of Linux, Apache, Tomcat, JBoss, and Java 2 Enterprise Edition, with financial data in QuickBooks. With no automated inventory control, no disaster recovery mechanism, and only limited security capabilities, the environment was unable to support significant business growth.

To prepare for continued growth, the company switched to Microsoft® software, including Windows Server® 2003, Exchange Server 2003, SQL Server® 2005, and Microsoft Dynamics™ GP. Today, Zone Labs has an integrated IT environment that helps improve business processes and employee productivity. The move to the Windows®-based environment has helped make the company's IT systems more manageable, reliable, and secure, and has improved its ability to find the necessary skilled resources, applications, and vendor support.

Zone Labs' Current Situation

Established in 2002, Zone Labs combines cutting-edge technology with the latest scientific research to provide a range of Evidence Based Wellness products, including foods, dietary supplements, and a skin care line. The company is based on the vision of Dr. Barry Sears, author of the best-selling

Zone books and a leading authority on the dietary control of hormonal response. Zone Labs has been profitable since its inception. However, by 2006, growth had slowed and the company's owners had brought in Jim Buchanan as chairman and chief executive officer, with a mission to increase visibility and expand the company. Buchanan, in turn, called on Carl Norloff to take the role of senior vice president of technology and gave him the mandate to make sure the proper technology was in place to support rapid business growth.

When Norloff arrived, he found a mix of systems based on the Debian GNU/Linux operating system; Apache, Tomcat, and JBoss server software; and Java 2 Platform Enterprise Edition, all of which were supported by one system administrator and one Java developer. In evaluating the IT situation, Norloff immediately found that many of the basics would have to be addressed first. "It was obvious that we would need to address reliability, scalability, security, and data integration," says Norloff. "At the time, there was no disaster recovery mechanism in place. Customer credit card numbers were stored unencrypted, and security was decentralized, with everything connected peer-to-peer and with user names and passwords maintained on local machines. Everything was based on

free open source distributions, without any vendor support.”

Another of Norloff’s tasks was to rebuild the company’s Web presence, which is one of the primary channels through which Zone Labs reaches customers. The company’s mission is to continually educate its customers about the impact of diet on wellness, which meant that Norloff needed to ensure that the site could be content-rich and easily browsable, as well as reliable and able to integrate smoothly with the necessary back-end systems. Norloff decided that, based on where the company stood, the best approach was a complete overhaul.

A Fresh Start – A New Solution

Zone Labs rebuilt its entire IT environment on Microsoft® software, including use of the Windows Server® 2003 operating system for core networking and directory services, Microsoft Exchange Server 2003 for messaging, and Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 database software as an enterprise data store. On that new foundation, the company replaced QuickBooks with Microsoft Dynamics™ business software and implemented a new Web site built on the Microsoft .NET Framework.

“I’ve been a big fan of Microsoft software for several years because I believe in the value of a single, integrated technology platform,” says Norloff. “The decision to go with Microsoft gave us almost everything that we needed from a single vendor, ranging from a reliable, scalable, and secure operating system to a real business management system. I already knew that I wanted to build the Web site on the .NET Framework, which made the decision to go with Microsoft an easy one.”

New Core IT Environment

The company’s overhaul of its IT en-

vironment started in September 2006 and was completed in three months. In the first six weeks, Zone Labs implemented file and print services running on Windows Server, deployed its Active Directory® service, and replaced the company’s Postfix e-mail system with Microsoft Exchange Server 2003. The company standardized on the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2003 messaging and collaboration client for all user desktops.

Comprehensive Business Management System

Next, Zone Labs turned its attention to replacing QuickBooks with a real business management system. After deciding on Microsoft Dynamics GP 9.0, which Norloff felt was “perfect for a medium-sized yet rapidly growing company like ours,” he turned to the Microsoft Web site to find a qualified partner and chose Paragon Software Solutions, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner.

“I talked to several companies, and liked Paragon the best because it was small and hands-on and could give us all the attention that we needed,” says Norloff. “I was concerned about transitioning from QuickBooks, which has a check register-based approach, to a real business management system, and we needed a partner who would be there for us and guide us through it. Paragon had both the proper mindset and the required expertise. We started in late October 2006 and set an aggressive goal of going live by December 14—and we made it.”

During those six weeks, Paragon helped Zone Labs install Microsoft Dynamics GP, convert and import the QuickBooks data, and load inventory data. Initially, the system was used by five people, who access it through the Microsoft Dynamics GP client running on the Windows® XP Professional operating system. Since then, Zone Labs has purchased another 15 licenses for use by its customer service personnel.

Zone Labs uses Microsoft Dynamics

GP modules for general ledger, accounts payable, accounts receivable, bank reconciliation, purchase order processing, inventory control, and sales order processing. In addition, the company uses the Integration Manager module to move orders and order status updates between its e-commerce site and Microsoft Dynamics GP.

New Web Site

In early November 2006, Zone Labs started rebuilding its online presence to run on Microsoft software—specifically, as an ASP.NET solution running on .NET Framework version 2.0. To accelerate development of the site, the company used DotNetNuke, an open source framework for Web applications. “Although it’s open source, DotNetNuke tracks closely with Microsoft’s direction,” says Norloff. “One thing I really like about it is that there are a number of third-party solutions that run on top of DotNetNuke, such as Engage Publish, which we use for content management.”

Future Directions

Today, the only computer at Zone Labs that still runs Linux is a combination e-mail gateway and filter. The company has since upgraded to Exchange Server 2007 and is in the process of evaluating the Microsoft Silverlight™ browser plug-in as a means of delivering an even richer customer experience on the Web.

In addition, Zone Labs is upgrading to Microsoft Dynamics GP 10.0, which will add significant new reporting capabilities. “Microsoft Office Excel® 2007 spreadsheet software can read Microsoft Dynamics GP 10.0 data directly, which will allow us to easily create an entire business dashboard in Excel,” says Norloff. “Now that everything is running smoothly, the next step is to examine the business and see how we can optimize its growth. Having access to all our business data through Excel will put the information needed to make such decisions at our fingertips.”

Benefits

By switching from Linux to Microsoft software, Zone Labs now has a proven, integrated IT environment that can scale to support business growth. Capabilities provided by Microsoft Dynamics GP are improving business processes, and Exchange Server 2007 is helping make people more productive. At the same time, use of Windows Server 2003 is helping to make the company's entire IT environment—including desktop PCs—more manageable, reliable, and secure. The company's move to Microsoft software also has helped Zone Labs minimize risk through improved access to the necessary skilled resources, applications, and vendor support.

"We now have a tightly integrated environment that is well supported and easily managed by a small team, in contrast to a patchwork of unsupported technologies," says Norloff. "Today, I'm confident in our ability to support even the most rapid business growth."

New Business Capabilities

Zone Labs is taking advantage of the new capabilities provided by Microsoft Dynamics GP, such as warehouse management, to automate processes

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www.zonediet.com

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For more information about the Microsoft
server product portfolio, go to
[www.microsoft.com/servers/
default.msp](http://www.microsoft.com/servers/default.msp)

and improve business operations. For example, the company no longer has to take inventory manually to monitor stock levels in its warehouse.

"In the past, we took inventory by hand, monthly," says Norloff. "Now we have real-time visibility into inventory levels at all times, which helps us control inventory costs while ensuring that we don't run out of products. Improved automation and visibility into the state of the business has led to many other benefits, such as improved customer service, faster order shipment, and lower order processing costs."

Increased User Productivity

While automated inventory management has improved productivity for warehouse workers, new capabilities provided by Exchange Server have done the same for office workers. For example, with everyone now accessing Exchange Server through Office Outlook 2003, schedules are visible and meetings can be easily arranged with only a few mouse clicks.

"One great feature of Exchange Server that we're taking advantage of is shared folders, which we're using as a queue for incoming customer e-mail," says Dave Szczuka, Vice President of Information Technology, who has been with the company for five years and used to administer the Linux systems. "Multiple customer service personnel can monitor the shared folder to ensure that customer inquiries are answered as rapidly as possible."

Enhanced Security and Reliability

Some of those same manageability features also have helped improve security. For example, security updates now are applied to desktop PCs as soon as they are made available by Microsoft, instead of waiting until Szczuka has the time. "In the past, applying a new security update meant visiting each and every user PC," he says. "I remember being here until midnight a few years ago because there was a new virus threat and I had to make sure that all

our systems were protected."

In addition, Zone Labs now has the systems and processes in place to ensure reliability and business continuity. "Today, we have the reliability that we need—mostly because it's fairly easy to manage everything properly," says Szczuka. "Even if something goes wrong, all servers are now backed up to a local file server on a nightly basis. We then do a disk-to-disk backup to another server on our network, and replicate that backup to another server at a hosted facility."

Reduced Business Risk

The company's move to Microsoft software has reduced business risk in more ways than just through enhanced reliability and security. Zone Labs now enjoys improved access to the skilled resources, applications, and vendor support needed to support the company's continued growth.

Improved access to the applications needed by the business has been beneficial, a key example being the company's adoption of Microsoft Dynamics GP. "Microsoft Dynamics GP was the perfect fit for a business such as ours," says Norloff. "I doubt we could have found a solution that was such a perfect match for our needs had we still been on Linux and, even then, I would never bet the business on an unsupported, open source enterprise resource planning system."

Szczuka wholeheartedly agrees with Norloff's perspective. "Having worked with both technologies, I would prefer to stay on Windows than go back to Linux," he says. "In addition to Windows being a better fit for the company, there's always a lot of new, exciting, and innovative stuff coming from Microsoft—and I like to keep on learning. For the needs of a company like ours, Microsoft software is clearly the right answer."