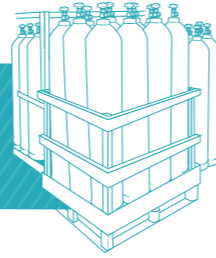


Distributor zone



IT challenges and solutions

Part 2: Decisions, decisions

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Keeping up with information technology, both in terms of software and hardware, is one of the great challenges of our time and can be particularly daunting for independent gases and welding distributors. As part of our Distributor Zone series on IT challenges and solutions, *gasworld* spoke with Chass Thuresson (pictured), IT Coordinator of Industrial Source, at last September's Computer's Unlimited Users Group Conference in Billings, MT (see "Software as a service: Computers Unlimited unique approach to software development," *gasworld* US edition, November 2018).

Finding the right system

A leading independent gases and welding supplier in the Pacific Northwest, Industrial Source of Eugene, Oregon is made up of an interesting mix of businesses. The company has a fire suppression supply business that includes extinguishers and related services, a wildland fire fighting supplies division, and an industrial gases and welding supply operation, which represents the largest part of its revenues.

With its very specific mix of goods and services, Industrial Source needed a software system that could manage its multiple businesses and chose Computers Unlimited (CU) as its provider over 30 years ago. Today, Thuresson leads IT at Industrial Source and is the first classically trained IT person to do so. He finds CU's TIMS products uniquely geared toward addressing the company's complex

operations. A member of CU's steering committee, which helps direct the development of its products, Thuresson does not shy away from beta-testing its latest products and likes to stay current with upgrades.

Next steps

Finding the right software system is step one. Then you are confronted with choosing which of its many associated components is right for your company. As we discussed in Part 1 of this series ("Reasons to upgrade," *gasworld* US edition, December 2018) having a dedicated IT professional on staff puts you on the path to well-informed decision making.

With his extensive experience in IT and a great support team, Thuresson is comfortable adding new software solutions and devices that make the company's operations more efficient but he does so in a measured way. For example, when Industrial Source adopted cylinder tracking it also added a routing and a delivery application, both logical add-ons given the company's new ability to track its assets.

The importance of planning

Of equal importance to your choice of software, is planning for its implementation. Education, training, and preparation minimize the inevitable glitches associated with the introduction of new programs and/or devices. If the purpose of the tool is to make things more efficient, the quality of data you enter, which is often a labor intensive process, will be critical to your success.

Implementing something as complex as new cylinder tracking software, which involves a distributor's largest



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asset base, can be daunting. When Industrial Source decided to launch CU's Advanced Cylinder Management (ACM) system four years ago, Thuresson knew that internal training and preparedness would be essential to a smooth transition. While the company had a good saturation of tagged cylinders, the barcoding process was not complete. "My rule was that every cylinder that moved through our plant had to be tagged before going live," Thuresson explained. "We initially had difficulty getting buy in from some managers. When the original launch date had to be cancelled because all cylinders were not tagged, we explained to the team again, in more certain terms, the importance of tagging and how it would pay off in improved efficiency on the dock. Once everyone was onboard, the process went smoothly and the efficiencies gained have been tremendous. We now know where all of our cylinders are at any given time."

Deciding when to upgrade

We are all aware of how fast software and electronic devices are replaced with newer and more efficient products. The economic stakes in investing in technology loom large – the price to participate is high but the cost of being left behind can be even higher. Here again, is where the importance of having a knowledgeable IT staff comes into play.

With his years of IT experience, Thuresson is comfortable being an early adopter of new technology and has beta tested several of CU's products. The company was one of the first to use CU's new mobile app for sales. "TIMS Assistant is very much like the software the team was accustomed to on their desktop, so the transition was smooth," Thuresson explained, "and everyone is familiar with cell phone devices."

He continued, "People like to talk to someone when ordering. It feels like this is behind the times, but it really is the nature of our business. That's why this new mobile technology, which is geared toward the account manager, is so good. We are finally getting technology into the hands of the people who need it."

Being an early adopter is not for everyone. With beta testing, you are dealing with a work in progress. When Industrial Source adopted the TIMS Assistant in January 2018, they had a slew of suggestions for improving the product. CU's development team worked on those and doubled the functionality of the program within nine months. "That's what's so good about working with CU," reported Thuresson. "They take our suggestions seriously."

For Industrial Source, their new mobile app has already paid off, allowing the sales team to write orders in the field, often for same day delivery. In addition, it has improved the accuracy of the company's ordering process and given salesmen more time for customers.


Industrial Source is also beta testing CU's new mobile TIMS Plant application, which allows distributors to manage their fill plant from a mobile device and replaces the existing wireless app in the earlier plant software.

The new product has all the same functionality as the previous one, only now it can be operated on a cell phone. With its plant already WiFi enabled, the transition to cellular devices, which everyone is comfortable using, is a low cost investment for the company and one that makes sense.

Adopting a recent release that runs on a new platform, such as IOS or Android, may require that you invest in new equipment. This needs to be taken into consideration when upgrading. For example, CU now offers a new version of its Mobile Delivery product, known as Delivery, which operates on cellular devices that replace the ruggedized devices used for its original Mobile Delivery product. CU's upgrade of this product is logical as the industry is moving away from ruggedized devices. Major manufacturers of that equipment have announced they will no longer make or support them in the future. But for Industrial Source, which invested tens of thousands of dollars in ruggedized devices just four years ago, this upgrade does not make sense at this time. The company likes the durability of the existing equipment and is happy with the application's performance.

Making sure a new application offers the features your company needs is also important. Often new products programmed for IOS or Android have different functionality than previous versions. When moving to new systems, look for a company that is willing to work with you on tailoring products to your needs and is willing to add features you require.

Stay informed

To insure you are positioned to make the best IT choices for your business, stay informed. Fellow distributors are your best beta-testers and are generally open to sharing their experiences with you. Chass Thuresson encourages promoting a healthy and active relationship with your software provider, and keeping your software current so you don't get left in the dust of the fast paced world of technology. 

News in brief

REGISTRATION FOR GAWDA SMC TO OPEN IN EARLY 2019

Mark your calendars for the Gases and Welding Distributors Association (GAWDA) 2019 Spring Management Conference (SMC) on May 4-6 at the Hyatt Regency, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Designed to target the needs of management and operations decision makers, the SMC serves as an ideal platform for tactical networking, process-oriented business education, and actionable take-home solutions. Several hundred GAWDA members and their guests are expected to be present. Attendees are the owners, presidents, CEOs, COOs, and sales, marketing, and operations executives at welding and gases distributor and supplier companies from across the US and several locations in Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

The spring conference also features a trade show for the industry. The GAWDA Contact Booth Program, which houses more than 100 GAWDA member exhibitors, showcases the latest product developments and a range of services that can help distributor members run their businesses more profitably and efficiently.

NORCO OPENS NEW OREM BRANCH

Norco Inc., the independent welding, safety, medical, and gas supplier, has opened its newest location in Orem, Utah. This new branch, along with Norco's other stores in Ogden and Salt Lake City, support both the Wasatch Front and Cache Valley with welding supplies, safety solutions and service. As a privately owned medical, welding, safety and gas supplier, Norco currently has more than 70 locations throughout the Intermountain West states of Utah, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming. Norco is one of a number of ESOP companies in Idaho.