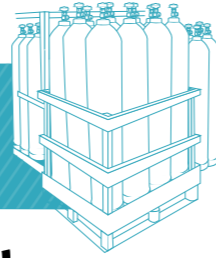


..... Distributor zone



A unique approach to software development

A review of the 34th Annual Computers Unlimited Users Group Conference

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As it celebrates 40 years of success in developing computer software and systems, Computers Unlimited (CU) finds itself an industry leader in providing integrated software solutions to the gas and welding industry throughout North America. From its base in Billings, Montana, the company has built a network of customers/collaborators which helps direct its development team to the next level of software.

Each year, CU hosts its Users Group Conference to roll out new products and to assist gas and welding distributors in finding the best suite of applications for their business. CU graciously invited *gasworld* US to attend its 34th annual event this past September and learn firsthand how the company's collaborative approach to product development has enabled it to create software products uniquely suited to the complex industrial gas supply chain.

With nearly 130 people in attendance, this was CU's largest conference ever, a testament to the value of all that can be learned at these events. In his opening remarks, CU president David Schaefer reported that "34 years later, we are still talking about how to solve some of the same complex problems, but what we talk about is always important." Just as important, from an attendee's perspective, is the two-way nature of the conversation. Audience input was both encouraged and welcomed throughout the two day proceedings, with questions answered promptly and notes taken on user suggestions. From a first-timer's perspective, I was especially impressed with the fact that CU presenters and



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employees were on a first name basis with most attendees. It was evident that much of the company's success is based on its ability to establish long-term relationships with its customers and developing products to meet their changing needs.

Then and now

From its beginning as a company that developed and sold general accounting and inventory software and hardware solutions locally in Billings, Montana, Computers Unlimited has grown to become a national provider of unified ERP software that makes a myriad of business processes more efficient.

One of CU's first customers was a gas and welding distributor and from that early commitment, its involvement in the industrial gas industry has grown and flourished. The company's TIMS (Total Information Management System) software provides a cohesive solution to business processes from order to fulfillment, including accounts payable and receivable, order entry, purchasing, inventory, and general ledger. Among the enhanced components available to

the TIMS core product are cylinder management, delivery, sales, credit card processing, e-commerce, Electronic Data Exchange (EDI), imaging, and cloud computing.

Evolving with the rapidly developing IT industry as a whole, CU has moved from the era of room sized computers to open source platforms to server enabled computing and databases. Today, CU is in the Cloud, and is actively developing APIs Omni and devices to connect its TIMS software to its customers' more mobile world. TIMS Intelligent systems are even beginning to use AI (Artificial Intelligence) to integrate business processes and data, enabling users to do a better job, faster and more efficiently.

CU is constantly improving its existing software and developing new solutions. In fact, the company makes new product releases four times a year. Information on these is all available through the TIMS online portal, which provides updates, documentation, learning materials, and support assistance and serves as a community forum. For first-hand information, demonstrations, and hands on instruction, the annual User Group Conference is an invaluable resource.

When your head in the Cloud is a good thing

David Schaefer pointed out that the cost to deliver gases is 7-10 times the cost to fill cylinders, as it involves complex scheduling requirements, optimizing routes, last minute order/delivery changes, etc. The secret to making each touchpoint along that path more efficient is measuring and monitoring processes and creating useful data without facing "analysis paralysis" or investing in large server systems. With Cloud enabled software, data is tied together and can be

seamlessly integrated with your ERP and other software systems and devices that can communicate with each other using standard APIs.

"Tech is cool," remarked David, "but you need to stay focused on fundamentals – growing revenue and protecting the bottom line." The Cloud enables a company to do so this without investing in large onsite server systems.

CU launched its original Cloud platform in 2009 and its Cloud customer base has grown 16% per year since then. Today the company has 78 Cloud customers and 1,200 users.

CU's data centers are hosted at a local data center and at Microsoft Azure, a set of cloud services that allows CU to build, manage, and deploy its applications on a massive, global network including EDI and Mobile API management. As an example, EDI enables CU to integrate TIMS with vendors including Miller, Lincoln, and Harris Products to name a few. CU's B-to-B e-commerce product is also used by over 50 CU customers, making it easy for them to place orders and pay off invoices through the web.

Asset management

Distributors are continually seeking greater control of cylinder assets to improve their ROI, and to meet regulatory and market requirements. One way to achieve this is through better forecasting of cylinder fill production requirements, such as how much to fill, when to fill, proper stocking levels at each location, contract price management, cylinder gas orders, and automation.

Toward that end, CU now offers TIMS products that:

- Manage production by enabling the forecast of cylinders and bulk gases demand, usage rates, and resupply orders
- Manage contract pricing for gases and cylinder rental rates, including forecasting financial impact of price changes and implementing price changes efficiently
- Automate processes, which streamline business, reduce labor costs, minimize errors, accelerate payment and

collection, including mobile credit card payments

- Improve delivery and allow for mobile cylinder gas orders

Among the many exciting new offerings introduced at this year's Users Group Conference was the new TIMS Delivery application, which CU built from the ground up.

Like so many of CU's products, TIMS Delivery was developed at the request of one of the company's largest medical gas delivery customers. This application replaces Mobile Delivery, which uses ruggedized devices, with a solution that uses mobile devices like smart phones and tablets. With real-time connectivity, it can process multiple delivery modes, has GPS truck location tracking, records delivery times and assets delivered, processes credit card payment, sends email confirmation receipts, dispatches new order in real time, and can handle electronic forms.

"TIMS plant allows distributors to manage their fill plant from a mobile device..."

Also new to this application is its ability to interface with Roadnet, Omnitrac's sophisticated software solution that combines cost-efficient routing, real-time data collection, and powerful analysis tools that allow users to create routes and load plans that work best for their fleet. APIs allow the TIMS Mobile Delivery user to seamlessly interface with Roadnet via CU's cloud platform.

CU rolled out the TIMS Delivery solution with Preferred Homecare over an 18-month period. According to Preferred Homecare it enabled a net annual savings to the company of about \$4m annually. Several CU Industrial gas customers are now in the process of rolling out this same solution.

Going mobile

Many new Mobile products were announced for IOS or android at this

year's conference. Among them was the TIMS Assistant, a mini mobile version of TIMS. It enables mobile order entry, allowing a sales team to make transactions from anywhere. Sales personnel can also check prices and product availability, create orders and quotes, make hot shot deliveries, and record notes and tasks.

TIMS plant allows distributors to manage their fill plant from a mobile device and replaces the existing wireless app in the earlier plant software. Users include Helget Gases, Industrial Source, and NexAir.

Another product attendees were very excited to see was the new TIMS Bulk Gas Manager. Like the plant manager, this tool allows distributors to remotely manage and track bulk products. Working with telemetry providers like Wise Telemetry, DataOnline, KnowGas, Chart, Level Devil, and Gas Log, this tool uses the Cloud and APIs to connect real time bulk level data to your ERP, where it can be analyzed and managed.

More to come

The conference highlights above are just a sampling of what was introduced over the two day event. Given the collaborative nature of product development at CU, a good deal of time was also devoted to discussion of what's in the pipeline now.

The company plans to continue to exploit the possibilities of the Cloud including building out a full suite of APIs so that its customers can link to other software systems that complement TIMS, like Roadnet and third party e-commerce solutions, to allow CU to offer increasingly more mobile and sophisticated products.

TIMS seamless interface with Microsoft's Power BI (Business Intelligence) platform is another major initiative for CU going forward. Power BI enables users to make sense of their data through interactive, real-time dashboards that unlock business insights. It includes a suite of BI tools, and can connect to hundreds of data sources, from which rich reports can be generated.

gasworld looks forward to following all of these developments. 