

Case study for Chapter 10

Hercules

Hercules Inc. is a multi-million-dollar multinational company which produces speciality chemicals. One branch of the industry is concerned with water purification and cleansing: the company produces chemicals which can be used for industrial water purification, and also supplies industrial water-handling equipment. Hercules has particular expertise in anything to do with water – purification of water, water-soluble or water-disposable chemicals, in fact anything which modifies the physical properties of water or water-based systems.

Within the firm's European and Asia-Pacific subsidiaries much of the business is carried out in remote locations where access to the company's information systems is difficult or impossible. The sales staff are operating in a key-account management mode: the accounts are large, and relationships are established and maintained over long periods. The company recognises that the products on offer are complex, and that salespeople need access to information if they are to provide effective solutions for customers. Salespeople used to rely on a narrow-bandwidth, dial-up connection to their laptops, but Hercules felt that this was inadequate in the modern context, so the called in consultants XcelleNet to provide a solution.

XcelleNet supplied a version of their Afaria system, which enables the head office to send information to the laptops on a more or less continuous basis. Afaria even includes a system for re-programming the laptops remotely to accept the system – a feature which was not lost on Hercules. The company was able to change systems on 500 laptops almost simultaneously – when users dialled in, a self-running setup file was automatically installed on their computers, and was activated immediately. Next time the sales people dialled in, they were automatically connected to the company's new Afaria server in Widnes, Lancashire.

Afaria is able to transmit information much more rapidly than previous systems because it takes an intelligent view of information. For example, if it detects changes in a PowerPoint presentation, it will only send the changes – thus perhaps only needing to send 2-300Kbits rather than 2-300MB. Communications run up to 20 times as fast, which is important if a customer is sitting waiting for an answer.

Joe Houghton, Sales Force Automation manager for Hercules Europe and Asia, is highly delighted with the system. He says that Hercules has been very pleased with the performance of Afaria and its relationship with XcelleNet over the past number of years. "That's why we've continued to use their products," he says. "After all, it isn't always possible to get to a phone line when a user is out in the field, hundreds of miles from anywhere. If I found myself in a greenfield site without something like Afaria I'd certainly put it in."

Case Study Questions

1. What other advantages does a high-speed communication system offer, from a sales management perspective? *High-speed communications enable the sales manager to retain better control over the salesforce, and to offer faster and more effective feedback. It also ensures that the salespeople are well-prepared, even if they have not visited head office in some time.*
2. How might a system such as Afaria help with time management? *Ensuring that information is up-to-date will reduce wasted calls and will help salespeople target the right customers at the right time. Call-backs are likely to be reduced.*
3. What would be the key elements in acceptance of the new system? *Perceived usefulness is likely to head the list, along with ease of use. Personal innovativeness is likely to be a*

feature of the type of salesperson who would be selling Hercules products, so would be a “given” factor. Support from XcelleNet would also be expected by the salesforce.

4. How might Hercules check that the system is meeting salesforce and customer requirements? *Hercules should have a systematic feedback process from the salesforce and (if possible) from the customers as well. Ultimately, the test will be whether the system increases customer satisfaction levels and sales.*