

Applebee's Simplifies Life for Managers while Improving Service to Customers

US-based restaurant chain Applebee's is the largest casual dining chain in the world and currently has 89 locations in 17 countries including Italy, Greece and Saudi Arabia. Like many of the large restaurant chains, Applebee's maintains specific performance criteria for its restaurants. These include metrics for the speed of getting customers in and out of a restaurant, quality of food, and levels of customer satisfaction. Five hundred of the 1850 restaurants are company owned, and the rest are franchises. Communication between all Applebee's restaurants is critical for maintaining consistent standards across all restaurants. To provide the most current corporate information to each Applebee's restaurant, the company provides portal software from BEA Systems Inc. The portal software provides a browser interface to different enterprise applications. Restaurant managers have access to daily performance records through dashboards in the portal. Upper-level management at Applebee's in Overland Park, Kansas, recently became concerned over some restaurant manager's complaints about difficulties in keeping up with constantly evolving menus and corporate policies. Managers felt that they were required to spend too much time monitoring performance using the corporate portal software. Applebee's launched a systems investigation to learn more about the complaints and to determine the feasibility of providing a fix. Systems analysts found that the complexity of using the dashboard systems was too much for most managers. To access performance statistics and metrics, managers were faced with "a sea of information these managers are supposed to weed through every day", explained Patty Cutter, Applebee's IT project manager. What's more, when metrics for performance standards indicated that a restaurant was substandard, the manager would have to phone Applebee's headquarters to learn strategies for improvement – a process that was time-consuming for both manager and supervisor.

With a full understanding of the problem, Patty Cutter and fellow systems analysts set out to perform the analysis to define how the problem could be addressed through the development of a new system. They determined that an ideal system should:

- Provide managers with the latest menu specifications along with instructions on how to execute any changes.
- Provide managers with alerts whenever the restaurant's performance in a specific area falls below the corporate threshold, eliminating the need for managers to dig through a 'sea of information'.
- Provide suggested action plans with each alert that provides steps the manager should take to rise to corporate standards, eliminating the need to phone headquarters.
- Provide flexibility within the system so that software in all restaurants can be changed and updated from headquarters to reflect changes within the organization.

With a clear view of what the new system should do, Patty Cutter consulted with BEA Systems to see if the company that provided the original portal software could provide a solution that would meet the new organizational needs and general corporate goals. Developers at BEA Systems recommended their AquaLogic HiPer Workspace for Retail software as an ideal solution. The AquaLogic software uses a Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) that would provide the flexibility that Applebee's wanted. The software is a composite application that can use web services to quickly notify store managers when a restaurant isn't meeting certain performance criteria, and provide possible solutions to the problem. An added advantage is that the AquaLogic software is designed to work with the portal software already installed in all Applebee's. Applebee's is rolling out a production version of the new application for its portal to its 500 company-owned restaurants. After being fully tested in those restaurants, the software will be recommended to each of the company's 1350 franchise restaurants. The company views the software as a big time-saver for its managers. "It is extremely important to us that we minimize the amount of time our managers are spending behind a computer", said Frank Ybarra, associate director of communications at Applebee's. What makes this an ideal solution is that it saves manager's time, while actually improving their ability to maintain Applebee's high standards.

Questions

1. Suggest some ways in which end users could be involved in this project from Day One. Why is it important that end users are involved?
2. Should change management be an important part of Applebee's implementation strategy? Explain your answer.
3. What advantage does a SOA provide for Applebee's? Why do you think SOA and web services have become so popular in new systems?
4. What benefit(s) did Applebee's gain by choosing BEA Systems to design the new system?

SOURCES: Havenstein, Heather, 'Applebee's Taps BEA Tool to Boost Operations', *Computerworld*, June 19, 2006, www.computerworld.com; Applebee's International (website), www.applebees.com; BEA Systems (website), www.bea.com.