

Success on schedule

In just a few years, eCONNEX AG has developed from a network and Internet specialist into a specialized CRM solution provider. Along with the areas of business, the focus of competence has also shifted: from technology to business consulting. Today, eCONNEX relies primarily on Microsoft technology. The concentration on a single platform has paid off: employees have been able to deepen their competence quickly and to match better business consulting and technical implementation. In the meantime, the software company has become able to acquire large international projects. eCONNEX earns about 80% of its sales with services related to Microsoft Dynamics CRM. Growth peaked at about 30% per year. Since mid-2008, eCONNEX has been using the **Microsoft Sure Step** project methodology. Continuous process optimization, careful design, and detailed documentation all ensure that CRM projects are implemented reliably and efficiently.

In 1996, the real world was still all right. If you wanted to go shopping, you went to Karstadt, messages came by fax, and electronic banking meant the customer terminal in the vestibule of the local bank. The Internet was still in its infancy: Access by modem was so slow you could brew your coffee while an image was downloading. There was still a gold-rush atmosphere in the IT scene. More and more companies wanted a business card on the Web and wanted to replace their company mailbox at AOL or T-Online with their own domain. eCONNEX was born. In the beginning, the Kiel software company concentrated on Web projects and the implementation of networks and email servers. With growth came increased complexity of projects. The "Infrastructure" division was formed. In 1999, the company reorganized into a corporation. Later, eCONNEX entered the project business as the partner of a small CRM provider.

Concentration on one platform

eCONNEX managed for a long time with no clear brand strategy. Customer wishes were the deciding factor, along with the initial situation found on-site. But the "vendor's tray" strategy eventually reached its limits. For one thing, the size of the companies eCONNEX was working for grew. Many relied on a uniform IT infrastructure, generally one based on Microsoft technology. And second, the software company was confronted with growing resource problems. "The projects were getting larger and more demanding. If we had kept dancing at every wedding, it would hardly have been possible to accumulate the know-how we needed," remembers Alexander Eck, eCONNEX AG manager. Since 2002, the company has primarily used Microsoft for its infrastructure needs. The eCONNEX manager admits that this was no simple decision: "A close association with only one single provider is always a business risk. After all, we have to invest a lot to learn the technology in detail." In the end, the choice wasn't made only for reasons of technological dominance, but also due to Microsoft's market strength and the associated investment security. A study carried out in collaboration with the University of Applied Sciences Bonn-Rhein-Sieg confirms that estimate. The Microsoft partners polled all stated that they had especially benefited from the high degree of recognition of the market leader. For eCONNEX, the single-platform strategy proved to be a step in the right direction. "For our employees, the clear focus is a blessing. Instead of retraining every time, they can now move directly up the learning curve," clarifies eCONNEX boss Eck.

The CRM business is the engine of growth

Starting in 2005, Microsoft Dynamics CRM rounded out the portfolio of eCONNEX AG. "We had already had our eye on CRM for a while, and we got in after the publication of Version 3.0. For us, the seamless integration into Outlook and the improved user-friendliness were deciding factors," says Eck. In the same year, eCONNEX implemented their first CRM project at the van and RV specialist Hobby. It became the cornerstone of a success story: To date, the Kiel-based software company has completed more than 30 CRM projects, with volumes averaging between one hundred and two hundred users. In the meantime, there are two industry solutions for window installers and media companies. "We have especially invested in putting together the business know-how which is of central importance for CRM projects," explains Alexander Eck. The potential of the CRM market is still huge. So optimization pays off quickly.

Professional project methodology

One measure that has brought eCONNEX a long way is the introduction of the **Microsoft Sure Step** project methodology. This implementation process is based on procedures and processes with a history of being best practice in many international software projects. Properly applied, project runtimes, costs, and risks can be significantly reduced. "Sure Step is ideal for software companies who implement many similar projects and need to maintain consistently high quality," says Alexander Eck. For example, Sure Step can be used to describe the tasks and roles of individual project members in minute detail. "There's no duplication of effort, no confusion of competence. At the same time, the risk of coordination problems is lower. That means we can implement our projects much more efficiently," says eCONNEX manager Eck. However, Sure Step isn't just a gift from heaven. Behind the success of today is the backbreaking work of many months. "To be able to introduce Sure Step, we basically had to reinvent ourselves. We had to abandon our department-oriented organization, and now we work on a strictly project-oriented basis," explains Alexander Eck. eCONNEX even hired a new employee entirely devoted to the organization, documentation, and development of the internal Sure Step project. The introduction of the methodology took place in parallel with ongoing business, and lasted more than half a year. Tobias Rohrbach, trainer at the Microsoft partner-specialized consulting firm Succentric GmbH, guided the project as consultant and moderator. Step by step, he went through the project processes with the eCONNEX team. The results of the optimization were collated into a detailed project guideline. "Today, every person knows what they have to do, and how their work must be documented. The individual gears of the value creation process mesh precisely," analyzes Alexander Eck. eCONNEX now approaches CRM projects in a completely different way. Whereas project specifications seldom were more than 20 pages in length, now 150 pages are standard. "Since we've been working with Sure Step, we're investing significantly more in project preparation. But that means our customers can be sure that the implementation will remain within time and cost limits," clarifies Eck. He sees another advantage in the standardization of working technology. "If multiple Microsoft partners are working with Sure Step, they can help one another out with staffing during capacity bottlenecks. There are no tedious hand-offs. That especially helps us when working with our partner impello and our Chinese and Malaysian developers," says Eck.

The eCONNEX manager has never regretted the switch to Microsoft Dynamics CRM. And that's not just because of the modern technology and professional project methodology. For him, the close and nearly loving care from Microsoft is just important. "Anybody with lots of Microsoft products in their portfolio starts to lose tracks of all the marketing measures, contacts, and options. Our partner manager bundles all that information together and helps us be more successful. That's absolutely professional," says Alexander Eck with satisfaction. And the marketing research institute IDC confirms that good grade. In the study "Worldwide Independent Software Vendor Programs 2006. Vendor Analysis", the analysts at IDC examined several partner programs. In a direct comparison, Microsoft was in second place in 2006. Alexander Eck also says that conferences like Convergence, the most important inter-industry event related to Microsoft Dynamics enterprise solution, help strengthen customer relations.

Today, eCONNEX is earning about 80% of their sales from services related to Microsoft Dynamics CRM. The last yearly growth rate has been 30% per year. That's a success that Sure Step is now also contributing to. "We are now capable of implementing technically demanding, international, large projects reliably. The service portion has grown disproportionately. That especially applies for business consulting. Because we're specialists, we can now relax more when looking towards the future – even in times of crisis," emphasizes eCONNEX manager Eck. Microsoft Sure Step is a topic that will keep him talking in the future, as well. "A continual improvement process is the most important prerequisite in order to use Sure Step successfully in the long run. We're always working on it – with external support, too."

Company

The software company eCONNEX AG was founded in 1996 in Kiel, Germany. In 1999, the company reorganized into a corporation. eCONNEX earns the greater part of its sales in the project business with Microsoft Dynamics CRM. The rest is in infrastructure projects. 30 employees work at the Kiel and Hamburg offices.

Initial situation

For a long time, infrastructure and Internet projects were the focus at eCONNEX AG. For many years, they have relied entirely on Microsoft technology. In 2005, eCONNEX decided to focus more on the CRM project business. To do this, they looked for a high-powered replacement for their previous CRM software.

Solution

Microsoft Dynamics CRM won that race. This software fit into the existing Microsoft-heavy portfolio, and was considered the best for us in mid-sized and large enterprise. There was also the factor of investment security resulting from a strong technology and marketing partner.

Advantages

The switch to Microsoft Dynamics CRM brought eCONNEX double-digit growth. The share of CRM projects of total sales is now about 80%. eCONNEX is working with the **Microsoft Sure Step** methodology, and is capable of implementing projects efficiently, quickly, and within planned cost limits.

Employees

30

Microsoft Sure Step

The **Microsoft Sure Step** project methodology is based on procedures and processes with a history of being best practice in many international software projects. Properly applied, project runtimes, costs, and risks can be significantly reduced. Sure Step is associated with a continual optimization process. Processes are continually questioned and adapted to new requirements.

Microsoft Sure Step – the advantages

Standardization in the project business ensures a constant high implementation level. Among the most important advantages of Microsoft Sure Step are:

- The direct comparison with best practice helps Microsoft partners to optimize their own processes
- Project runtimes are reduced
- Project costs and project risks are reduced
- Standardization ensures constant, high project quality
- Projects stay within time and cost limits
- Clear task delineations and standardized documentation avoid losses to friction
- Employees can be utilized flexibly – even between companies
- Reliable, competent handling of projects creates trust on the part of the user

Microsoft Sure Step brings change

Today, eCONNEX AG is working in project-oriented structures. An employee hired specifically for this purpose bundles project communication and project documentation. The software company places a great deal of value on careful project design. The advantage to the customer: Consulting is technically competent and projects are implemented in a convincing way.

Quotes

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