



AbilityNet

www.abilitynet.org.uk



At A Glance:

- **Company:** AbilityNet
- **Location:** Reading, Warwick, Worcester, London (UK)
- **Industry:** Non-profit
- **Company Size:** 50 to 99
- **Challenges:**
 - Distributed workforce with no shared systems caused confusion among people
 - Poor inventory management resulted in errors in monthly stock take
 - Data trapped in legacy systems hindered financial visibility
- **Software switched from:** Sage, SharePoint, various bespoke systems
- **Other software considered:** Goldmine, Navision
- **Results with NetSuite UK:**
 - Easily accessible centralized data enables better control over company's assets
 - Optimized asset and inventory management helps inventory audits be close to perfect
 - Real-time view of financial operations has helped in AbilityNet's turnaround and improving company's ongoing fundraising efforts

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The results

AbilityNet is a national charity helping disabled adults and children use computers and the internet by adapting and adjusting technology to suit their needs. They know only too well how technology can enhance the lives of its customers, but as an organization they also know how frustrating and limiting it can be when you don't have the right tools. “Before NetSuite we had no central systems. This caused massive problems for our users,” said Eliot Martin, Client Services Director at AbilityNet. “Now we use NetSuite across the business—it's put us firmly back in control and has improved life for our users and our customers.”

AbilityNet first started using NetSuite in 2004 and now uses every aspect of the system across the business. With data no longer trapped in legacy systems, distributed across multiple systems or hidden in individual files, the centralisation of data has proved to be one of the biggest benefits to the company, enabling better control over its assets and a clearer view of its financial operations. Things didn't used to be so simple: “We used to manage our entire internal and external inventory on a single Excel spreadsheet,” said Martin. “Our monthly stock take was always out. We ended up writing off stock or wasting valuable time trying to find out where it was.” AbilityNet is now able to manage its inventory with ease. “With NetSuite our first inventory audit was as close to perfect as you could get it,” said Martin.

AbilityNet's Financial Director is also a big fan. Prior to NetSuite everything had been done using Excel, resulting in distributed and inconsistent data. Keeping budgets under control was difficult. Now AbilityNet has a real-time view of its financial operations, including a detailed picture of the present and future value of its assets. “NetSuite has made sure our financial management is nailed down. We'd even go so far to say that NetSuite is partly responsible for our financial turnaround,” said Martin. “It's certainly saved us much heartache and hair-pulling!”

Most importantly, the company can now present accurate information to potential fundraisers about how the company is performing. Also thanks to NetSuite sales order processing and case management functionality helps to communicate just how much demand there is from disabled customers for equipment and on-going support. “Without this information we'd find it difficult to get funding and the AbilityNet organization simply wouldn't exist,” said Martin.

The challenges

With offices and home users across the UK, AbilityNet is a highly de-centralized organization. But with email as the only way to connect people, there was little sharing of information. The company housed a bespoke customer database on a server based in the Warwick office. But none of this information could be shared. “This caused massive problems for people outside the central office,” said Martin. “Things tended to drop off the radar and we had no idea who we were reaching from a customer perspective. This was a big problem for us. We clearly needed to centralize our customer database.”

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AbilityNet looked at a number of solutions, but they were all based on on-premise servers that would require VPN connectivity between the distributed users. With the amount of financial and support overhead that this would involve, this simply wasn't an option. A business colleague at another company recommended NetSuite. “NetSuite presented a number of demonstrations and it became apparent very quickly that NetSuite met all our requirements,” said Martin. “And from an IT point of view, the hosted software as a service delivery model meant there was very little to do and the costs would be much lower. We were excited.”

Although AbilityNet was initially looking just for a CRM solution, they soon began to realize that NetSuite offered much more. As a supplier of adapted hardware products and equipment kits to its customers, AbilityNet had previously built a sales order management system on an Access database. But this, coupled with a weak inventory management and asset tracking system, presented numerous challenges. To address this, the company had previously looked at Sage, but according to Martin, “it just wasn't up to the job”. The spotlight now swung to NetSuite. With a sales order processing system and inventory management already built in, the decision to work with NetSuite was made.

The solution

AbilityNet began by putting the sales order processing part of the NetSuite solution in place, using it for numerous functions from the company's website, to its purchasing, inventory management and pick-pack-ship functionality. After just a month, the NetSuite system was up and running. This was a seminal moment for AbilityNet: “This was the first time we'd had a fully centralized system that everyone could access—it was brilliant!” said Martin.

With AbilityNet's employees now used to having a centralized system for sales it wasn't long before it was being used for all customer data. “To make sure we got the most of the system, we invested heavily in training, taking users into a one-day classroom environment to play with NetSuite,” said Martin. “We customized the interface for our users. It's very intuitive— even our most non-technical people got to grips with it very quickly.”

“Once we had the framework up and running, NetSuite pretty much looks after itself,” said Martin. Although it would have been the easy option, they didn't stop here. As the skills of the users developed, and as the requirements of the business developed, AbilityNet looked at what more NetSuite could do.

The ability to customize the system has been one of the most attractive features of NetSuite for AbilityNet. They immediately hit the ground running and have taken the NetSuite system to new heights. “We use every aspect of NetSuite's 'out of the box' functionality,” said Martin, “But we wanted to really stretch it so we dove straight in and started customizing it for our own particular needs. Whatever we want to do to support the business, NetSuite is our weapon of choice!”

Currently finalizing their advanced project management implementation, Martin and his team have also developed a number of bespoke applications. Notable among these is a system to support AbilityNet's equipment loan bank. Lending out equipment to customers to try before they buy, the company needed to make sure it could book equipment in and out and keep track of where everything was and when it would be coming back. Not only does AbilityNet now know exactly who's got what, but it is also able to create reports of equipment demand and usage, information that is critical to share with funders who can easily see how their money will be spent and how the need is justified.

Will they ever stop developing the system? Martin thinks not: “NetSuite is a dynamic system. It's never going to stay still because our organization is dynamic and never stays still. Without NetSuite I'm not sure what we would have done. There is a solid relationship between AbilityNet and NetSuite that will continue well into the future.”



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