

We are done with paper documents!

An interview with Marek Witkowski—Director of IT Department in Südzucker Poland



What is the beginning of automation of business processes in companies? How hard it is to convince employees to use new, electronic system and how big is the impact of user interface in that matter? How creative companies can be in using BPM platform and what are the advantages of implementing one? We are talking about this and not only with Marek Witkowski – Director of IT Department in Südzucker Poland – a polish member of leading sugar producer in Europe.

WEBCON:

- A decision to implement a Document Management System is often delayed by many companies until the moment it becomes necessity. What were the beginnings of such solution in Südzucker Poland?

Marek Witkowski (IT Director in Südzucker):

Document Management System is a very capacious term. The truth is, we have several document management systems. Their core is built around cost invoice flow but we also have business trips flow and something we call Central Document Repository. Besides that we have many other flows adjusted to specific needs of our departments.

We began with our own application that automated the vacation requests. Then, when SharePoint 2007 appeared on the market, we decided to use it for further process automation. What convinced me in Microsoft’s platform, was the idea of one corporate portal where an employee could have an access to all necessary information. I put my faith in SharePoint and it was a success.

- It often happens that implementation of DMS/workflow causes fear, especially in those employees and departments that are very accustomed to work with paper documents. How hard was to convince Südzucker employees to the new system?

Amazingly, it didn’t take long for our employees to adjust and like the new way of performing day-to-day tasks. Why? Simply because it makes their life easier. E.g. in case of leave request they can immediately check how many days they can still use, without calling HR Department, waiting and wasting precious time. The fear of necessity to use a computer was quickly replaced by benefits of using the new solution.



Marek Witkowski

Director of IT Department in Südzucker Poland since 2003. His major projects include an implementation of Microsoft Dynamics AX in 15 subsidiaries as one, integrated system. Currently Marek Witkowski focuses on improvement and automation of business processes based on Microsoft SharePoint. His philosophy is based on quality and long-term strategy.

- That surely helped automating other processes. How did you proceed from there?

Due to specific company structure, we decided that we also needed to automate cost invoice processing, based on SharePoint. At some point we merged 20 subsidiaries and created one bookkeeping center. This situation complicated document flows. How?

There were situations where single invoice travelled through 4 of our subsidiaries until the process was finished. All that by regular mail. That was true organizational nightmare. The whole process was very long, and the risk of losing or damaging documents on the way was significant.

What's more, it used to happen that certain documents were withheld on the way, which delayed the whole thing. We quickly realized we cannot proceed this way and immediately took actions to improve the situation. The solution was ready after 6 months and after another half of a year we introduced it to the whole company. The main goal was to shorten the time needed to send documents (it wasn't hard when we digital versions) and also to improve security.

The main goal of implementation was to shorten the time needed to send documents and improve security.



- What benefits did you expect from the company's point view?

First of all, to save time on invoice processing. We also wanted to have better control over what's happening with documents on each and every step of the process. Currently, invoices are being sent to one place and register there in the system. It allows us to check anytime where a given document (in electronic form) is and who's responsible for it. We have full control and everything runs smoothly.

- How many employees use the system?

Currently intranet is being used by about 400. However we plan to extend it to all of our employees. We intend to introduce touch-screen devices in production halls and allow everyone to use some of its functionalities, e.g. to access the system with chip card and make a leave request.

- During the implementation you put strong emphasis on interface. Why was it so important?

Interface is one of the most important factors when it comes to make a project of new IT system implementation successful. Skype is a good example here. It has desired functionalities, it's simple to operate and it's being used regularly by 100 million people all over the World. That's why when we implemented WEBCON Business Process Suite on our SharePoint environment and put such strong emphasis on end-user interface.

We wanted it to be homogenous, intuitive and simple. Also it helps a lot when system automatically fills some form fields and offers instructions and tooltips whenever it's necessary. We're glad we have managed to introduce such solution. It makes people really want to use it and at the same time it narrows down the number of mistakes made in the process.



- How did it influence user experience?

Currently, the system can be used by employees with very little or none experience with computers. The web interface used in SharePoint does not require any additional trainings. Everyone who uses, even a little, the Internet will be able to handle our intranet and its basic capabilities. System guides and informs user on every step of process so there's no way of not knowing what to do. Tooltips, frames with instructions etc. are very helpful in that matter.

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- What's the result of using only one platform for multiple process automation in terms of managing IT systems?

It is definitely easier to maintain such system and the results are visible almost instantly. When you have several dedicated applications, there are sometimes problems with updates, compatibility and in some cases, companies are forced to buy additional modules to make things work like they want to.

When you have only one but complex and flexible system, such problems don't exist. Updates will be made for just one platform and all users will automatically have the same version. This is another advantage of web interface. What's more, such services are included in a system purchase costs. There's also no risk of losing all data e.g. when one of employees'

computers gets damaged, like it is in case of dedicated applications.

When it comes to costs, it all depends on organization's strategy. In a short-term perspective, purchase of a various, dedicated applications can be potentially cheaper. However, in case of a long-time strategy an investment in one, complete platform is more profitable. There are no integration cost, no need to buy additional modules, make modifications or hire new specialists to maintain each application separately.

Currently, in our company there are only two systems: Microsoft SharePoint 2010 (with WEBCON Business Process Suite) and integrated with it Microsoft Dynamics AX. That's basically it. What's interesting, we've recently checked if our employees install other software on their desktops. The truth is they don't! Almost everything they need is available on the intranet level. That makes maintaining workstations a lot easier, not only on daily basis but also during emergency situations.



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- Has implementation of BPM system with electronic document management capabilities allowed the company to reduce number of paper document in use?

Definitely. We store most of documents in electronic form in our Central Document Repository. Entering them to the system is much quicker than traditional puncturing and putting paper documents into proper file binders. No to mention searching those documents after a while!

The system is so simple that entering documents into it is barely noticeable for end-users. At the same time, efficiency it provides make all documents very easy to find. When you consider that alternative is based on drawers full of documents, catalogued with logic only known to its author, the choice is simple.

- Besides classic document management and process automation, WEBCON BPS is also used in your company as an internal auction platform. Can you tell me more about it? How did you come out with this idea, how it's done and what are the benefits?

An internal auction system is particularly useful when company decides to replace current equipment with a new one. Recently, we decided to buy 50 new computers. That brings the question what to do with the old ones? Store them in magazine until they grow really old and become worthless? Hardware was good enough for home purposes so we decided to resell them to our employees with huge discounts.

Both sides get profit. Employees buy equipment (computers, cars, furniture, office accessories etc.) for low prices and the company doesn't need to store and sell them outside of the organization.

Our auction system is a similar to eBay, however, there are several modifications to it. Each employee can place only one bid and auction end-time is only an estimation. This way people don't spend too much time on trying to get the best deal. System also prevents from any misuses because administrators can check history of given auction anytime. The main rule is: highest bidder always wins. Auction system was possible thanks to huge WEBCON BPS capabilities and flexibility.

- Your company uses OCR module for a several years now. How do you do it, what are the benefits and is it worth recommending?

OCR [Optical Character Recognition] is certainly worth recommending. It allows full document digitalization and what comes with it - full text and keyword search. It makes life much easier.

In our company OCR works two ways, when it comes to Central Document Repository. During working hours only barcodes are being scanned to allow document reach appropriate person. Then, after working hours, all documents get through full text scan by OCR, so next day it's possible to find them using any word of its content.

Initially, in our invoice processing flow, we used Kofax software that has great scanning capabilities, but wasn't exactly fitting our strategy to base our IT systems on web interface. We had to invest additional funds in integration with SharePoint, set a separate server and train staff (both users and admins). Not to forget the cost of software and maintenance itself



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At some point due to reorganization, our vendor closed its offices in Poland which made communication and support difficult. Despite the fact we had a working software, we started searching for another solution. We were aware when something goes wrong, losses will be potentially very harmful to the organization.

At the end we chose OCR offered by WEBCON. It is fully integrated with SharePoint which was our priority. It also works within WEBCON BPS so in terms of technical support we have to contact only one vendor. I think we made a good decision making this transition. It's easier to manage the whole system for administrators who have to deal only with one platform, and also for end-users who have everything gathered on a single screen.

- What are the most important factors to take into consideration in a process of choosing BPM platform?

Firstly, a flexibility of the system. It is crucial to be able to make modifications easily and also to adjust system to company's specific needs. Additionally, any changes should be doable by internal IT department what saves time and money significantly. My experience shows that with WEBCON BPS, average IT specialist will be able to make new workflows after just 1-2 days of training.

Equally important is integration with other solutions allowing data flow with connection to external sources. Also, don't underestimate the role of support. Not only in terms of updates, patches and technical assist, but also in terms of system development and adding new functionalities. Being open to clients' suggestions and incorporating their ideas into life is a significant factor when it comes to choose a software vendor.

Last but not least, is the system performance. If the system is slow it will be making work harder instead of making it easier. That's why it's important to choose a system that will be able to follow users' actions swiftly.



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- Who should be involved in decision making process of which system company invest and who should take part in its implementation?

The decision should be made primarily by IT department which has to recognize company's needs and decide whether a certain solution will meet them. At the end, IT specialists will be responsible for managing this system and they have to choose between dedicated applications and complex, flexible systems.



Implementation is another story though. It requires business users to participate in order to understand what kind of benefits they can get and to take a responsibility for generated effects. The WEBCON BPS has a great advantage in that matter, because in case of incorrect assumptions (of designed processes), even those with little experience can quickly make corrections and necessary modifications to make process work in a proper way.

- Our experience shows that change management is usually crucial when comes to implementation of BPM platform. What's your insight?

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It is incredibly important. Both users' needs and business processes tend to change and develop very quickly (that's the sign of our times!). Moreover, it happens quite often that companies create workflows that don't work exactly as they would want them to and there's a need for change. When it comes to dedicated applications, making changes is usually expensive, long and requires external intervention. Meanwhile flexible BPM platform allows to make any modifications swiftly, usually only by internal IT department.

Let me give you a life example. One day our Quality Department asked me to create a workflow that would control the process of washing cisterns. Sounds trivial but it quickly became obvious that creating a dedicated application from a scratch will be very hard and it definitely won't be profitable. We decided to make proper workflow within WEBCON BPS. It took us just one day to make a simple and implement it. Some of my friends from other companies envy me such flexibility and simplicity as they need to spend much more time developing even the simplest

workflows. In the meantime our employees are very satisfied with the system and complement it for making their life a lot easier.

- Why have you chosen WEBCON Business Process Suite?

We had been considering other alternative systems that allow to create workflows, but what got us the most in WEBCON BPS is its flexibility, user/administrator friendly interface and also development capabilities. Positive opinion of SharePoint community members pointing at huge potential of the system had a significant impact as well.

I remember when I asked my friend how long would take him to make a certain [workflow in SharePoint](#) and how long in WEBCON BPS. He said: 'in first case at least a week. In WEBCON BPS 1-2 days to make it fully functional'. It was a clear message to me that if we can save 3 days on a simple process, this is the solution we should invest our money.

Taking into consideration that business needs will steadily grow and our employees will ask for more improvements, we've chosen a platform that allows to meet those expectations and make life of IT Department easier. At the end, the point is to spend as little time as possible on making modifications, allow business to work effectively and give other employees a system that won't require trainings and constant IT support.

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About Südzucker:

Südzucker is Europe's leading supplier of sugar products and is well positioned in the special products, CropEnergies and fruit segments. The success of the company is embodied and supported by the interdisciplinary competence, experience, social skills and commitment of 17,900 employees world-wide