

CASE STUDY:

BJ'S RESTAURANTS SERVES UP AUTOMATION

SPOTLIGHT**ORGANIZATION:** BJ's Restaurants**CHALLENGE:** The organization, which now boasts 75 restaurants coast to coast, is on a mission to take advantage of the change in the view of IT from servant to business partner.**SOLUTION:** Network Automation's BPA Server was used to automate the lowest level data capture tasks right up to automating payroll and finance jobs.**BENEFITS:** When there was 28 restaurants it took three days to do a menu price increase across the company. Now it is completed in 75 restaurants in 15 minutes.

BACKGROUND

The way the business now views the IT group at BJ's Restaurants is working to everyone's advantage. In most restaurants, IT is generally viewed as a function of finance, where the prevailing ethos is keeping costs down. But at BJ's, which has been growing 20 to 25 percent over the last five years, IT is viewed as a function of operations. That makes all the difference when it comes to accelerating business process automation and optimization.

THE CHALLENGE

Brian Pearson, VP of Information Services at the organization, which now boasts 75 restaurants coast to coast, is on a mission to take advantage of the change in the view of IT from servant to business partner.

"We are at least catching up to the technology curve and maybe even starting it in some ways," says Pearson of IT's role as an operational enabler. How? "We recognized that the only limits of automation were our imagination."

Equally important, the more automation IT could deliver for business processes throughout the company, the more it was able to keep a lid on staff growth. "We recognized early on that we could go two ways: automate the heck out of our environment or continue to add body count. The restaurant industry is a fairly low margin business, so clearly we wanted to keep the IT team lean."

THE SOLUTION

That led the company to Network Automation's BPA Server, and the business process automation that both IT and business users have been able to create has had a big impact. It's been used to automate the lowest

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level data capture tasks right up to automating payroll and finance jobs. *"You don't have to be a developer to develop code,"* Pearson says, noting that recently BJ's treasurer and analyst himself built the code to automate a function for enterprise-wide reporting.

At terminals across the organization, new automated code is checked for every 15 minutes. Pearson points to the restaurant's ability to seamlessly deal with the Femot worm as an example of the success that has enabled. When the virus originally hit a couple of years ago, Pearson's IT group recognized that it would have to shut off a service in some 17 terminals in each of what was then about 65 restaurants. The group made the code change to automate the service shutdown, tested it, and half an hour later the affected service was shut down. *"We protected ourselves from something that could have been very damaging,"* he says.

More recently, it's been able to take advantage of the ability to design and automatically execute code to help the restaurant deal with food recalls. *"We can react in a timely manner to a big issue,"* says Pearson. Additionally, every support department in the company - IT, payroll, purchasing, and so on - uses the automation tool BJ's created called Switchboard. Restaurant managers who need to solve an issue fill out a form and, based on their answers a text message, is sent to the appropriate support person. They can reply, change the state of the ticket, and contact users in the organization's highly mobile workforce more efficiently thanks to such data being included in the support request.

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THE BENEFIT

"We took essentially this very manual environment, where grabbing the most basic business data was not done daily," says Pearson, as he sums up the advantages heavy automation has brought to the company. *"It was aggregated and summarized and grabbed once a week. So, information like sales and labor data were coming in very infrequently, and often not in time to make a good business decision to change direction. Now we're grabbing that data every 15 minutes, pushing and pulling information, and that lets us have a more nimble environment. Probably one of my best analogies is when I arrived here, we had 28 restaurants and it took us three days to do a menu price increase across the company. Now we do it in 75 restaurants in 15 minutes."*

Organizations can be hesitant to embrace the automation of their business processes, fearing the lack of human intelligence in the effort. That's a misconception, says Pearson. *"I don't think we see a lot of danger or risk in automating a process, especially if we can test it thoroughly, which we do, and gain evidence that it is working appropriately."*

This goes hand in hand with building in feedback mechanisms, capturing errors and logging them to a database, reviewing them, and then remediating them. *"For anyone who is interested in automating an environment, you have to build a good feedback mechanism - and have a thinking person to respond to that,"* says Pearson.



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