



SME eBusiness Case Studies

O'Donnell Design

This case study is one of a series produced by Enterprise Ireland to meet the need for in-depth eBusiness cases relevant to the needs of our client base, the majority of whom are small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in manufacturing or internationally traded services.

We in Enterprise Ireland hope the case studies not only illustrate the relevance of eBusiness to traditional Irish businesses, but also highlight the problems and pitfalls the case companies experienced and the solutions they adopted to overcome these problems.

These cases are only one of a range of eBusiness resources provided by Enterprise Ireland. Most of the other resources can be accessed through our eBusiness webpages

www.enterprise-ireland.com/ebusiness

Here you can access more cases, "how to" guides about eBusiness and related topics, details of solution providers, access to our free eBusiness e-zine and discussion forum, eBusiness events guide and links to interesting reports etc.

We wish to thank the participating companies for their cooperation in the preparation and publication of these case studies.

Many of the case studies are about participants in our eBusiness Acceleration Fund Initiative under which grants of just under €12.7 million were made available to 102 Irish companies to encourage the early implementation of significant eBusiness projects. The funding for these grants and these case studies was provided to Enterprise Ireland by "The Information Society Fund" which was established by Government to progress the objectives of the Government's Action Plan for the Information Society.

1. Overview

O'Donnell Design (www.odonnellfurniture.com) started making pine furniture for the local domestic market in Ballydehob, Co. Cork in the early 1970s. Like most Irish companies, O'Donnell had its ups and downs through recessions and collapsing economies. Now, the small family run company has earned itself a reputation as one of the top suppliers for hotel furniture and this has become their key focus.

The market for O'Donnell's services has, to date, been primarily in Ireland and the UK. The organisation has undertaken contracts for many of the hotels in the Sheraton, Jury's and Hilton hotel chains. Some of their more high profile clients include:

- Le Meridien Cumberland, London
- Marriott Druid's Glen Hotel & Golf Resort
- SAS Radisson, Limerick
- The Clarence Hotel, Dublin
- The Morrison Hotel, Dublin
- The Metropolitan, London
- The Great Eastern, London

O'Donnell's main competition is in the UK. With 80% of O'Donnell's revenue being generated by exports, the organisation needed to make it as easy for customers to deal with them as it was for a UK-based hotel to deal with a UK based supplier (who is obviously more local to potential clients).

Although O'Donnell was producing a product of a very high standard, the organisation's internal systems were letting it down. Prior to the implementation of new systems, O'Donnell Design faced a number of challenges that could be gathered under two headings:

1. Communications
2. Control and tracking systems on the factory floor

In order to solve these issues, the new systems had to fulfil a number of requirements:

- Provide better internal communications.
- Provide better communications with external suppliers and customers.
- Give O'Donnell Design a presence on the web.
- Be able to measure the production rates of items on the factory floor.
- Be able to track staff more effectively.
- Give clients access to a secure client area where they could see information pertinent to their specific jobs.

Implementation of a new hardware infrastructure (network, PCs and server) combined with the implementation of a shop floor control system and email package, solved many of the issues faced by O'Donnell. Development of a website also helped to lift the profile of the organisation.

One of the biggest issues faced by O'Donnell was that of finding a vendor that had the expertise to fulfil the organisation's requirements. The quality and availability of experienced vendors set the project back significantly, turning what was a 12-month project into a 24-month project.

O'Donnell Design was also fortunate to have the advice of an external consultant. Like many SMEs, this advice was invaluable in ensuring that O'Donnell got the best system for its investment by empowering the team and allowing them to meet with vendors with a greater level of knowledge, knowing what could and couldn't be done.

Once new systems were in place, benefits to O'Donnell customers included:

- **Better access to data** – Clients could receive real time information, via email, on their particular jobs.
- **More definitive planning** – O'Donnell could break down jobs and work out a delivery time with a high degree of accuracy.
- **Increased Customer Confidence** – Better tracking systems meant that O'Donnell could deliver when they said they were going to deliver. "The new systems gave current and potential clients a lot of confidence" commented O'Donnell.
- **Accessibility** - Individuals within the company were more accessible through email.

There were a number of lessons learnt by O'Donnell Design and, in particular, by Aodh O'Donnell, Technical Director and Project Manager, who "thought it would have gone more quickly, more easily and more smoothly":

- Don't underestimate the time it will take.
- Dedicate a Project Manager.
- Don't always trust what suppliers tell you.
- Get an independent advisor.
- Don't underestimate the costs.

2 . Background

2.1 Company Information

O'Donnell Design (www.odonnellfurniture.com) started making pine furniture for the local domestic market in Ballydehob, Co. Cork in the early 1970s. Like most Irish companies, O'Donnell had its ups and downs through recessions and collapsing economies. Now, the small family run company has earned itself a reputation as one of the top suppliers for hotel furniture and this has become their key focus.

Originally based in an annex of the family home, the business soon grew and moved into a 5,000 sq. ft. factory premises. The company continued to grow both manufacturing volumes and its reputation and, in 1983, it was approached by a Danish furniture manufacturer looking for increased capacity outside of Denmark.

In 1983, the company started manufacturing occasional furniture in teak for export to the UK and US, growing exports to around 15 container loads (with 475 nests of tables per container!) each year. Danish designers designed the items and they were manufactured by a consortium made up of O'Donnell Design, Caulfield Furniture & Castlebrook Furniture. What may seem strange is that O'Donnell chose to work with its competition rather than against them – this way, larger orders could be secured with the work being split across the three organisations.

Towards the end of the 1980s UK buyers were putting pressure on O'Donnell to increase production to meet their needs and threatened to award contracts elsewhere. In response, the organisation moved to new premises in Skibereen effectively increasing manufacturing space by over 400% to 27,000 sq. ft. Around the same time recession hit the UK and exports dropped from 18 containers in 1988 to just 1_ in 1989.

From there, the company undertook a number of small jobs until, in 1996, sales of furniture to hotel chains had increased dramatically and a decision was made to make this O'Donnell's focus on an ongoing basis. "We built a reputation for quality and service", commented Aodh O'Donnell, Technical Director at O'Donnell Design.

In addition to hotels, O'Donnell has also won contracts to design and build furniture for student accommodation – its reputation for quality making it the obvious choice for an environment where the 'guest' may not be as careful as most!

Contracts awarded to O'Donnell can range in size from €200,000 to €1.1m and with 20 contracts planned in for 2002, the organisation is expecting to realise turnover of around €5m.

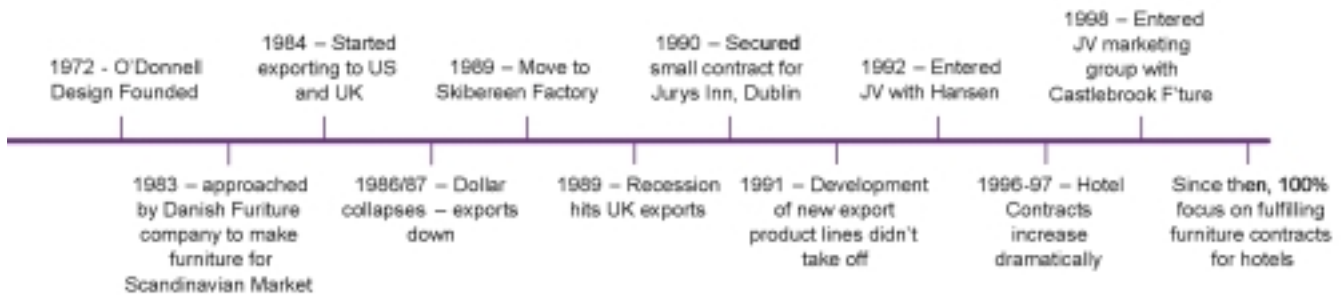


Diagram 2.1 - The History of O'Donnell Design.

2.2 Market Information

The market for O'Donnell's services has, to date, been primarily in Ireland and the UK. The organisation has undertaken contracts for many of the hotels in the Sheraton, Jury's and Hilton hotel chains. Some of O'Donnell's more high profile clients include:

- Le Meridien Cumberland, London
- Marriott Druid's Glen Hotel & Golf Resort
- SAS Radisson, Limerick
- The Clarence Hotel, Dublin
- The Morrison Hotel, Dublin
- The Metropolitan, London
- The Great Eastern, London

In general, O'Donnell Design will deal with one or more of four key parties when working on a specific job:

- Architect
- Designer
- Contractor
- Hotel Owner

There is always input from each of these parties but the level of that input varies from contract to contract and depends on who O'Donnell is contracted to work for. For example, the designer may simply provide O'Donnell with sketch drawings and then leave. Conversely, that same person might have huge input to the project on an on-going basis throughout the project.

O'Donnell actively encourages its clients to bring them in as early in the process as possible – having undertaken many hotel contracts over the years, they have a good idea as to what works. For example – when designing furniture for a hotel room, they may have to take account of turning space for a wheel chair or positioning of power points.

Castlebrook Furniture is O'Donnell's main competitor in Ireland though the two companies tended to work together in order to win bigger jobs – with a large combined manufacturing capacity, larger contracts were more likely to be awarded.

O'Donnell's main competition is in the UK. With 80% of O'Donnell's revenue being generated by exports, the organisation needed to make it as easy for customers to deal with them as it was for a UK-based hotel to deal with a UK-based supplier (who was obviously more local to potential clients).

Quality was also a key factor when clients were looking at potential vendors. In terms of this quality, O'Donnell was better than most of the competition and, based on this, the company was receiving an increasing number of Requests for Quotation (RFQs).

3. Problem Definition and Objectives

Prior to the implementation of the new systems, that were part funded with a grant from the Enterprise Ireland eBusiness Accelerator fund, O'Donnell Design faced a number of challenges that could be gathered under two headings:

1. Communications
 - a. Internal and external communication was paper based
 - b. No website and therefore no presence on the WWW
2. Control systems on the factory floor
 - a. Tracking shop floor efficiency
 - b. Logging staff in and out
 - c. Knowing what job was on the production line and when it would be complete and ready for delivery/installation
 - d. Being able to give a good estimate on how long a job would take to complete

Communications

Although O'Donnell was producing a product of a very high standard, the organisation's internal systems were letting it down.

Until the advent of the new system, internal communication was paper based. As well as being time consuming to write, notes would often go missing thus messages weren't reaching their intended recipients. Microsoft Outlook Express was running on the organisation's network, but this wasn't utilised by staff.

Communication with clients was through a combination of fax and phone. Fax was used for transmission of drawings between O'Donnell and its clients. Sometimes these drawings would run to 20 pages thus creating queues at fax machines at both ends of the chain – effectively, only one client could be dealt with at any one time. There was a PC in place with a 28.8k modem but this was inadequate for the external communication needs of the organisation going forward.

One thing lacking in the opinion of Aodh O'Donnell was a website for the organisation. "Websites are a vitally important tool today", commented O'Donnell, "looking for a company's website is something you wouldn't have done five years ago". A website would enable the company to showcase its work and could, potentially, give clients access to information on the current production status of a particular job.

"looking for a company's website is something you wouldn't have done five years ago"

Control systems on the factory floor

Prior to implementation of the new system, all shop floor processes were undertaken manually with, for example, timecards and a punch machine used by staff for logging in and out. This created another manual process when it came to a Thursday evening and all the data from the timecards had to be transferred into the salaries system.

It was often difficult to work out how long a contract would take to fulfil and therefore be sure of an exact delivery time. As O'Donnell was often the last contractor into a hotel, it was their time that got squeezed thus, a good estimate of job completion and delivery times was required.

Additionally, with manpower being the major overhead for O'Donnell, it was imperative to maximise efficiency on the shop floor.

4 . Decision

"The grant from Enterprise Ireland gave us a focus and meant we were able to go further than we would have been able to on our budget".

A solution to the above problems was already being considered by O'Donnell Design when, in early 2000, the organisation approached Enterprise Ireland regarding the eBusiness Accelerator Fund. "We had always planned to do something", commented O'Donnell, "The grant from Enterprise Ireland gave us a focus and meant we were able to go further than we would have been able to on our budget".

The project being considered by O'Donnell would have taken them a lot longer to implement had they not been working to the time constraints set by Enterprise Ireland.

5 . The Project

5.1 eBusiness Solution

5.1.1 Business Dimension

In order to solve O'Donnell's current communications and shop floor control issues, the new systems had to fulfil a number of requirements:

1. Provide better, faster and more efficient internal communications.
2. Provide a reliable link with external suppliers and customers.
3. Give O'Donnell Design a presence on the web.
4. Be able to measure the production rates of items on the factory floor (quite a challenge considering each contract could be completely different).
5. Be able to track staff on each job ensuring maximum efficiency.
6. Give clients access to a secure client area where they could see information pertinent to their specific jobs.

Infrastructure

Before software development could commence, O'Donnell needed to ensure that the IT infrastructure would meet the needs of the new system being rolled out. The network in place was a number of years old and was not suitable for a growing organisation. A new network infrastructure had to be put in place. Additionally, the company invested in new PCs and a new server on which to run the new systems.

Communications

In order to better streamline communications, Microsoft Outlook was installed. Each member of staff in the office was also given a personal email address. This meant that:

- Internal communications were faster and easier with a far reduced chance of messages being lost.
- External communications were faster – rather than having to rely on faxes, designs would be sent to clients via email (in Adobe Acrobat for example). Many clients could be dealt with simultaneously and it was no longer dictated by who got to the fax machine first! Sending electronic files also meant that clients were able to print them in colour and to whatever size suited them (fax being limited to A4).
- Quick queries could be fired to and from clients via email saving the time and cost of a phone call.
- All communication was infinitely more traceable both internally and externally.

Additionally, with personal email addresses, clients were 'conversing' directly with specific people within O'Donnell and therefore a better rapport was built between the two.

Website

The O'Donnell website (www.odonnellfurniture.com) was developed as part of the project. Its primary function was that of an information source allowing clients and potential clients to see the O'Donnell Design portfolio in addition to current work in progress. It was designed to capture the key Unique Selling Propositions (USPs) of O'Donnell Design – quality, integrity, creativity and innovation.

The website provides the following information:

- Company profile
- Current list of clients
- Current projects
- Portfolio – past projects
- Personnel – current vacancies
- Contact details

Although the option of a client area was part of the original specification, it was decided that new internal systems had to be put in order before this could happen. O'Donnell wanted to ensure that if this functionality was available to clients, the data they had access to would be of value to them. This functionality is still under consideration and is likely to be implemented in the future.

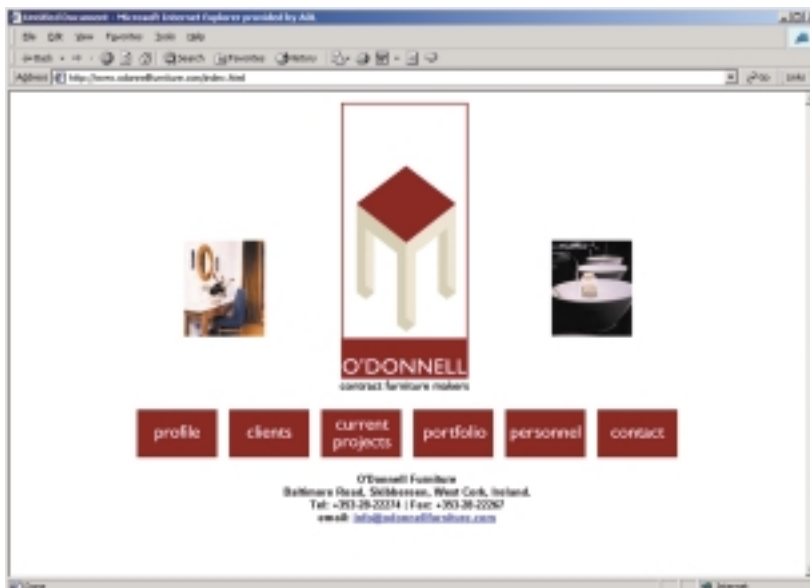


Diagram 5.1.1(a) Website homepage

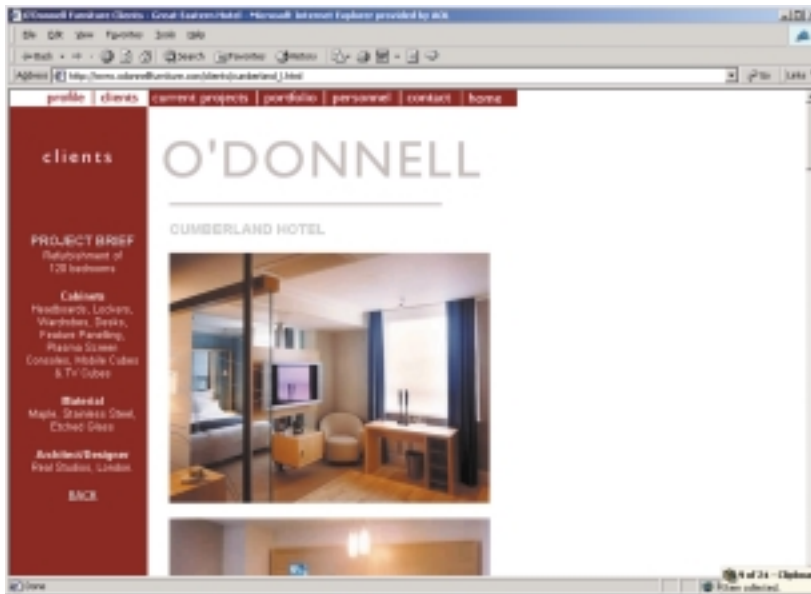


Diagram 5.1.1(b) Showcase of clients

Control systems on the factory floor

It was identified very early in the process that the major cost of production was staff and not, as one might suspect, materials. Thus, it was important to find a system that could track the hours being worked by staff and the time put into each product in order to produce a shop floor efficiency rating.

In order to implement a full production tracking system, O'Donnell first had to identify what the actual processes were. Without going through this process, they would simply have been running poor quality processes through the computer and the results would have been of equally poor quality "If you put rubbish in you get rubbish out", commented O'Donnell.

"If you put rubbish in you get rubbish out"

Initially, all the processes were mapped out on paper, stuck on the wall of the factory floor. The Job Specification Sheet (JSS), once a hard copy form used to work out the time a job would take to produce, was developed in Excel ready for integration with the new software system.

Tobar Software was employed to implement Trakker, its shop floor data capture system. Trakker broke the manufacture of each item down into its constituent parts and, once this was done, each part was given a production time. Now, the production manager could work out how long each part of an order took to produce and therefore how long the total order would take to produce. This data could also be used to:

- Identify how staff on the shop floor could best be utilised to give maximum efficiency.
- Better estimate production schedules and therefore give a good estimation of delivery times.
- Identify bottlenecks in the system as the piece being produced moves through the 7 process areas of the factory, and allocate resources to minimise the impact of those bottlenecks on production times.

One of the easier things to implement quickly was an online system for staff to clock in. The implementation of this new system meant that rather than stamping a time card, staff on the shop floor entered a three-digit code into a computer and they were logged against a specific job.

PivotTable report

A PivotTable report is an interactive table that quickly combines and compares large amounts of data in Microsoft Excel. You can rotate its rows and columns to see different summaries of the data, and you can display the details for areas of interest. Because a PivotTable report is interactive, you can change the view of the data to see more details or calculate different summaries, such as counts or averages.

CAT5

CAT5 is one of several standards that specify "categories" (the singular is commonly referred to as "CAT") of cabling systems. The specifications describe the cable material as well as the types of connectors and junction blocks to be used in order to conform to a category. CAT5E supports a data transfer speed of 100 Mbps.

Hub

Hub - In general, a hub is the central part of a wheel where the spokes come together. In a networking sense, a hub is a place of convergence where data arrives from one or more directions and is forwarded out in one or more other directions.

This again assisted in tracking the efficiency of the shop floor as the production manager was able to see how many hours had been logged against a particular job, how progressed that job was and therefore how efficiently the job was being produced. If efficiency on the factory floor fell below 75%, the management team knew there was a problem.

Each week, data was exported from the system into Microsoft Excel where Pivot Tables (see sidebar) were produced allowing the management team to quickly and easily build reports of efficiency per employee, per process or per product.

5.1.2 Technical Dimension

Technically, the systems introduced by O'Donnell Design were reasonably straightforward. The old network was replaced with a CAT5e (see sidebar) standard network providing far higher data transfer speeds around the network and externally onto the internet.

Into this, O'Donnell linked two PCs on the shop floor, and eight PCs around the office, one for each member of office staff. A Dell server was installed to run Microsoft Outlook and the other applications required.

A 128k ISDN line was purchased and was used to link with external email services and the internet. A Cisco Hub (see sidebar) was used to link everything together.

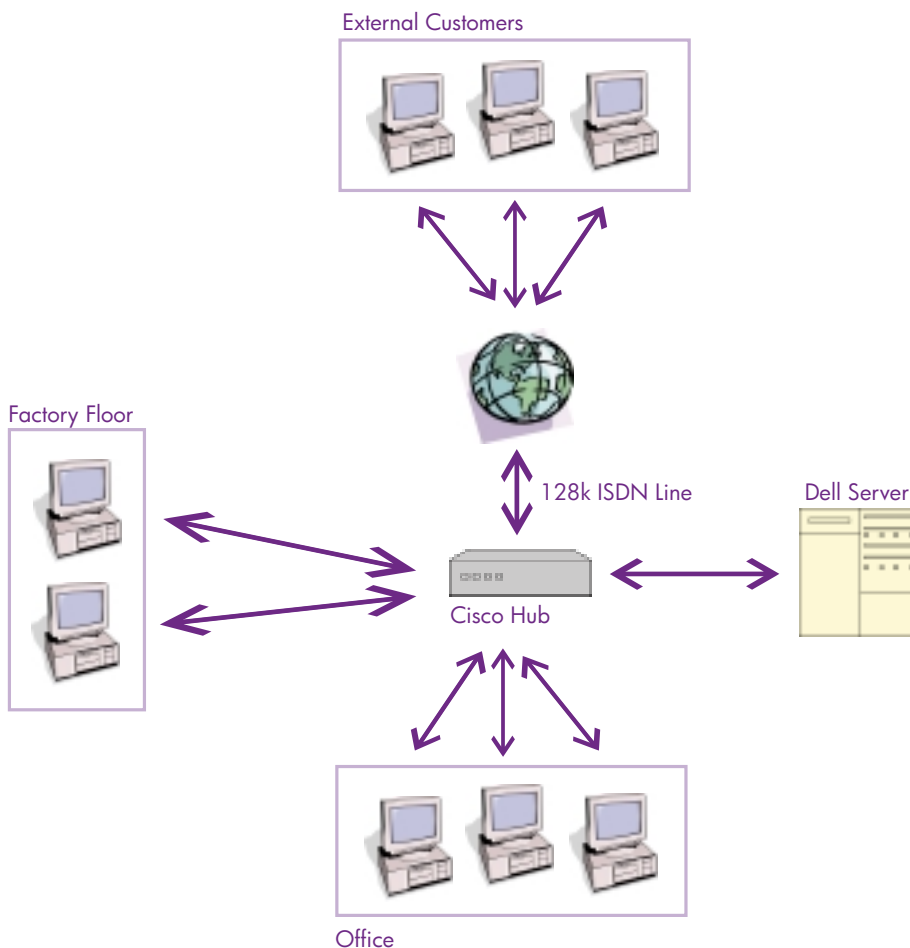


Diagram 5.1.2 - Overview of new network infrastructure.

The shop floor control system was developed using Sage, a package best known for providing accounting software.

At the time, O'Donnell also invested heavily in software, purchasing both Computer Aided Design (CAD) software and a 3D design package. The purchase process and requirements for the CAD software was straightforward though the same couldn't be said for the purchase of the 3D design package. Like many SMEs in this situation, O'Donnell Design was misled when purchasing the product and, having spent €19,000, realised that it didn't meet the requirements of the organisation. Now, rather than being an integral part of the manufacturing process, it is simply used to put together 3D drawings for inclusion into proposals. This obviously adds some element of value but certainly not to the extent that O'Donnell thought the software would.

5.2 Third Party Selection

One of the biggest challenges faced by O'Donnell was that of finding the right vendor to implement the solution. "We lost around 6-8 months just trying to find the right supplier", commented O'Donnell.

Although there were many vendors in the market, many of them hadn't implemented a system similar to the one O'Donnell was looking for. Although many vendors claimed they had the experience, when it came to the crunch, it became apparent that they didn't.

Even once O'Donnell thought they had found the right vendor, trying to get time with them was impossible – this delayed the process considerably, turning what was a 12 month project into a 24 month project.

It wasn't until half way through the project that O'Donnell came across Tobar, a Cork based software design house. It was Tobar that eventually took the bull by the horns and got to work on designing the shop floor control system. Initially, Tobar took the Job Specification Sheet (which by this point was in excel) and transferred it across to Sage. Trakker, Tobar's shop floor data capture system was then built around that.

"The use of an independent consultant was invaluable and probably saved us a fortune"

O'Donnell was also fortunate to have the advice of an external consultant. Like many SMEs, the advice of the consultant was invaluable in ensuring that O'Donnell got the best system for its investment. The advice received empowered O'Donnell and allowed them to meet with vendors with a greater level of knowledge (rather than arriving at meetings with no idea as to what could and couldn't be done). "The use of an independent consultant was invaluable and probably saved us a fortune", said O'Donnell.

5.3 The Project Team

5.3.1 Internal Team

The internal team consisted of a number of staff at O'Donnell Design:

- **Aodh O'Donnell, Technical Director** – Aodh was the overall project manager and had responsibility for ensuring the project stayed on track.
- **Philip O'Sullivan, Production Manager** – Philip's main responsibility was for the shop floor control system on the factory floor.
- **Andrew Byrnes, CAD Operator/IT Manager** – Andrew was employed as a full time CAD operator and is now also tasked with the ongoing maintenance of the IT infrastructure.
- **Jim O'Donnell, MD** – Jim oversaw and had full control over the entire project.
- **Peggy Collins, Accountant** – Peggy had responsibility for identifying how each constituent part of the project affected the accounts side of the business.
- **Delwyn Klevenow** - Delwyn had responsibility for sales and marketing including relationship management with the web developers.

5.3.2 External Team

- **Cormac McCarthy, Tobar Software** – Cormac worked very closely with O'Donnell Design to implement Trakker and ensure it integrated with the JSS spreadsheet that was already in place.
- **John Murphy, DDSI** – John provided ongoing consultancy support and advice on what could and couldn't be done from a technology perspective.
- **CCAD** – Used as a vendor for CAD software and also assisted in the installation of some of the network hardware.
- **Deirdre Souchere, SDTI** – Deirdre designed and built the O'Donnell Design website.

5.4 Setbacks and difficulties

The biggest issue faced by the team, as discussed earlier, was that of trying to find the correct software development partner. Once they found that partner, Tobar Software, much of the project fell into place.

5.6 Budget

O'Donnell heavily overspent on some parts of the project but broke-even or under spent on others. Overall, the project went over budget by around 50% (though more functionality than originally planned was added into the specification).

One major issue that hadn't been considered by Aodh O'Donnell was the time-pressure that the project would put him under. All in all, he had to invest around double the time he thought it would take to implement the system.

6 . Outcome

6.1 Benefits for Customers

According to O'Donnell, "The main benefits to our clients were time, accessibility and quality".

Other customer benefits included:

- **Better access to data** – Clients could receive real time information on their particular jobs i.e. your headboards are 38% complete. Data from the shop floor control system was interrogated and the results emailed to clients.
- **More definitive planning** – O'Donnell could break down jobs and work out a delivery time with a high degree of accuracy – thus, the organisation was able to give clients a more definitive delivery time. This proved that O'Donnell could deliver jobs on time even if installation was delayed by other forces i.e. delivery or late finishing by other contractors.
- **Increased Customer Confidence** – Better tracking of production and, therefore, better estimates of delivery times meant clients didn't have to build as much contingency into their jobs – O'Donnell could deliver when they said they were going to deliver. "The new systems gave current and potential clients a lot of confidence" commented O'Donnell.
- **Accessibility** - Individuals within the company were more accessible. Drawings could be sent out directly to clients in formats that offered better quality than a fax. If a drawing was emailed in Acrobat the recipient could zoom in, zoom out and print different sizes (in colour). No longer were clients tied into low quality A4 drawings as they were with a fax.

"The new systems gave current and potential clients a lot of confidence"

6.2 Benefits for O'Donnell Design

Many of the benefits realised by customers are the same as those realised internally by O'Donnell Design.

Others include:

- **Better knowledge** – The new shop floor control system gave the management team a better overview of processes on the shop floor and how those processes could be managed to best improve efficiency (by identifying bottlenecks for example). The efficiency target on the shop floor was around 80% and the new systems allowed O'Donnell to work towards, and better, that target.
- **Time saving** - Implementation of the new email system saved time and allowed staff to be more productive – no more waiting at the fax machine or listening to hold music!
- **Higher quality proposals** – Although the new 3D design system didn't live up to all its promises, it did allow O'Donnell to design and produce high quality 3D images for inclusion into proposals. The better the quality of the proposal O'Donnell submitted, the better chance it had of winning the contract.
- **Client Trust** - The systems and factory floor and processes made clients very comfortable and this could sway a potential client if two competitive proposals were very similar.

7. Lessons Learnt

There were a number of lessons learnt by O'Donnell Design and, in particular by Aodh O'Donnell who "thought it would have gone more quickly, more easily and more smoothly":

- **Don't underestimate the time it will take** – O'Donnell originally thought that the project would take 12 months to specify and implement – this has now been extended out to 24 months. Regardless of size of project, it will always take longer than an organisation expects.
- **Dedicate a Project Manager** – There needs to be one person dedicated to the project. This is primarily a co-ordination role ensuring everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing and the project is always on track. Management of this is key - you still have to do your own job and that can't slip either.
- **Don't always trust what suppliers tell you** - Suppliers might say that something can't be done. Everything can be done - it might be expensive or time consuming but it can be done. If an organisation is told something can't be done they should ask "Why"?
- **Get an independent advisor** – If it's possible to employ an independent consultant (and it is important to ensure their independence) they will add a lot of value to the project. Before their project started, O'Donnell wouldn't have spent the money or time looking for someone to simply "watch the watchers". When asked now, Aodh O'Donnell will say that a consultant would be the first person he would get on board. That person would then be used to identify system requirements and then watch that the project is rolled out properly.
- **Don't underestimate the costs** – O'Donnell overspent in both time and money, much the same as many other SMEs implementing similar systems.

8. Future Plans

Future plans for the system include:

- A secure client area on the O'Donnell Design website where clients can get access to data pertinent to any job in production.
- Updates to the logging in system so that staff can be logged not only against a job but against a specific part within a job. This will allow the management team to trace any production quality issues to a specific staff member.

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