

# Perfect partners

To one trail-blazing business, Microsoft's latest Dynamics AX 2012 release is old news, finds **Malcolm Wheatley**.

## PREDICTABLY,

there's a lot of interest surrounding the release of the latest version of Microsoft's flagship ERP system, Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012.

But amidst the hoopla, it's easy to overlook the fact that some companies have been already been living with it on a daily basis for some time—indeed, in some cases since early versions of parts of the new system became available in late 2009. What's more, so too have a small handful of carefully-selected Microsoft Dynamics implementation partners, chosen for their breadth of vision and in-depth expertise.

One such pioneering partnership: Microsoft Dynamics AX solution provider eBECS, and JJ Food Service, a £140 million 700-employee Enfield-based supplier of catering supplies and foodstuffs to restaurants, pubs, canteens and snack bars.

But JJ Food Service CIO Rif Kiamil is quick to reject the 'beta tester' label. 'Beta tester,' he insists, is an overly-simplistic description of the company's involvement in Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012's gestation.

"Quite simply, unless there was a clear value to the business, we wouldn't do it," he says. "But participating in Microsoft's Technology Adoption Programme (TAP) gives us early access to features of AX that are strategically important to us. Today, we're benefiting already from features that are only now becoming generally available to companies outside the TAP programme."

For instance, he points out, JJ's buyers have continual access to the company's MRP-driven Master Production Schedule (MPS)—even while a new schedule is being generated. Previous versions of AX, he explains, over-write the previous MPS with the new

one, leaving a window of time during which access to the MPS is not available.

More strategically from a CIO's perspective, perhaps, is the promise held out by Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012's in-built adoption of the Windows Communication Foundation. The result, says Kiamil, is a consistent code-base and allocation logic that will underpin the business's entire customer-facing order-capture applications, from the web to call centres, and from iPhone apps to Android devices.

"With AX, you've always been able to do pretty much what you want," he says. "The question is doing it as efficiently and effectively as possible. With Microsoft Dynamics

AX 2012, a lot of capabilities come built-in as standard, whereas previous versions required bespoke code in order to carry them out. It's obviously more efficient to go with the standard product rather than to maintain bespoke code."

### Close relationship

But the story really begins back in 2004, when the business was seeking a replacement for its elderly batch-driven Pegasus Opera ERP system. It was a selection process that rapidly confirmed Microsoft Dynamics AX—back then in its AX 3 release—as the way forward, but which also introduced Kiamil to Microsoft solution partner eBECS, Microsoft Dynamics Reseller of the Year.

eBECS, he discovered, is a specialist in the design and implementation of Microsoft Dynamics solutions for manufacturing, distribution and the extended supply chain. What's more, its solutions had won multiple awards, and eBECS was recognised internationally for its success in delivering Microsoft Dynamics solutions to organisations across the globe.

"In the selection process, you get to meet a lot of potential partners," he says. "But we 'clicked' immediately with eBECS—they were head and shoulders above the competition. We liked their culture, their style of working, their attitude to getting things done, and their ability to deliver on what they've promised."

And so, in due course, eBECS worked with JJ Food to firstly implement AX 3, and then subsequently upgrade it to AX 4, and then to AX 2009. AX 2012, in short, is the business's third upgrade—testimony to Kiamil's drive to support the fast-growing business with cutting-edge technology and processes.

As was the decision to join Microsoft's TAP programme in 2008, following the company's winning a Microsoft Dynamics Customer Excellence Award in 2007. The programme, open to both partners and end customers, would go on to involve JJ Food working closely with both Microsoft developers and industry experts at eBECS.

"For both partners and end customers, to be selected for TAP is something of an honour because being an early adopter can keep you one step ahead of the competition," says eBECS' Stephen Wilson

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*Rif Kiamil, CEO, JJ Food Service*

"There's stiff competition to get into the programme, and it involves making a serious commitment to test new functionality, as well as provide feedback to influence its development."

And indeed, adds Kiamil, as the business began to explore and test Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012's new functionality, the communication workload rapidly ratcheted-up.

"We've had a huge amount of communication with both Microsoft and eBECS," he says. "There have been phone calls or e-mails at least once a day, and sometimes more often. It's been an investment—but one with a very distinct payback."

### Profitable growth

eBECS' Wilson concurs. A major part of JJ's overall Microsoft Dynamics AX installation, he explains, is eBECS' own Call Centre Manager product, a solution that provides Microsoft Dynamics AX with a multi-channel sales capability that includes web ordering, customer relationship management, call centre management, fast order entry, and automated distribution.

"JJ's internal team, together with a team from eBECS, worked closely to implement and upgrade Call Centre Manager alongside the emerging new Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012 functionality," says Wilson. "Within six months of the launch of on-line ordering, 37% of all orders were arriving on-line."

Kiamil, for his part, pays tribute to the significant improvements that Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012 brings to business-critical inventory management and logistics processes. Already one of the best-performing firms in its sector, he notes, JJ Food can look forward to significant improvements in efficiencies and profitability when the full Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012 suite shortly goes live alongside Call Centre Manager.

"All it takes is one sunny day, and you've got 5,000 restaurants in London wanting extra bottled water," he says. "We really do expect an improvement in our ability to respond to what the customer wants—and to do so more efficiently than ever."

And by the time you read these words, JJ Food Service expects to have fully gone live with Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012—the first of many eBECS customers and future customers to do so.

"We're one of the few Microsoft partners worldwide with this amount of 'hands on' experience with Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012," says eBECS' Wilson. "We've an exceptionally close working relationship with Microsoft, and we work hard to have just as close a relationship with our customers."

JJ Food's Kiamil concurs. "Our partnership with eBECS, and our deployment of Dynamics AX, have been fundamental to our success over the last few years. With AX 2012, we're looking for that success to continue."

