

World's largest fruit company takes a fresh approach to business software.

ViaData's Catalyst bears fruit (and much more).

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Founded in Hawaii in 1851, Dole Food Company, Inc., with 2007 revenues of \$6.9 billion, is the world's largest producer and marketer of high-quality fresh fruit and fresh vegetables.

Dole South Africa was established less than 12 months after the deregulation of the fruit industry, and today is South Africa's 2nd largest fruit exporter. Dole exports a wide variety of citrus and deciduous fruit types to more than 70 countries across the globe including Europe, North America, Russia, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and Reunion, Asia, Indonesia and the Far East. .

Background

Dole experienced exponential growth soon after entering South Africa, capturing a significant percentage of the incumbent fruit export market. The company had installed a system to cater for their logistical and financial requirements, but planning was still performed manually, using Excel spreadsheets and an Access database. Dole engaged ViaData to write them a planning system. Traditional systems development using Delphi was used to successfully implement the new system. At the time Kirkey (an AS400 based product) was used for their ERP.

The existing AS/400 based business system was a customised version of a fruit trading solution developed in the USA, with Dole SA the only local user. Ongoing modifications were proving difficult and expensive with the original customisation team no longer available. The system was stable, but inflexible and not suited to integration with MS Office products. MS Access and Excel systems had proliferated to fill the gaps that the package could not support. In the rapidly changing fruit industry, Dole SA found their information systems hamstringing their ability to innovate and compete.

They went in search of a solution.

The scope of the system was not trivial, amounting to a full transactional processing ERP system covering amongst others: contracts, planning, receipt of intakes, dispatches, standard costing, actual cost processing, cost accounting, pooling, pallet tracking, accounting, forex management, grower payments, grower reporting and export documentation.

No mean task for any vendor not to mention a systems development house.

The hunt for the right system.

Dole SA developed an RFP and put it out to tender. Responses were received from ERP vendors intent on customising their solutions to meet Dole SA's needs as well as local package vendors. All these responses came in at significantly higher costs than

building the system from scratch, would have required major changes to Dole's business practices, had significant unknowns and were deemed excessively expensive. Not one provide Dole SA with the required flexibility and competitive edge they wanted.

ViaData was perceived by Dole SA as a company that understood Dole's business and was passionate about adding value in a trusted relationship. As a result, ViaData was tasked with investigating the possibility of creating a software solution that would cater for Dole's business requirements.

Growing a solution.



Figure 1 - Gerald Gant and David Kruger of Dole SA

ViaData performed a data assessment and created a complete data model of the business before demonstrating the ability of the model to support the business requirements using real business scenarios and data. Dole awarded the contract to develop and integrate their planning system to ViaData, based on the fact that it had practically demonstrated a thorough understanding of the business requirement and that references attested to ViaData's ability to deliver robust and flexible software.

Using the Catalyst business systems engine, ViaData were able to quote Dole SA a fixed price for phase 1 of the

development, commit to a fixed implementation date (this was critical as it had to be done between fruit seasons), and provide for close involvement of Dole SA staff during development so as to provide ongoing support.

As per plan the new system (named Dolfin) went live for the start of deciduous fruit season in 2009. The project was implemented on time, on budget and the first season's operation was successfully navigated.

"Dole's new information and payment system is a huge improvement with basically no hiccups and no queries from our side. We hardly saw Paul in our office this year, which is a good thing. " - Deon Meyer , Sundays River Citrus Company (Pty) Ltd, one of Dole's key customers.

This was, in reality, the tipping point for Catalyst, ViaData's Business Systems Engine. The ViaData team had for some time been mulling over possible solutions to some of the intense frustration they had with traditional systems development methods and tools.

"At ViaData I watched for years as we chased the elusive 'reusable' code. We changed base architectures, languages, frameworks and methodologies many times, only to find the same issues had to be solved again and again and our ability to deliver business value never really improved." recalls Craig Byren, ViaData's MD.

"Faced with the challenge of Dole's unique systems needs, we decided to stick our necks out and create what we now call a "business systems engine". We set out to remove as much of the wasteful coding as we could and exceeded our

own expectations. We ended up with an “engine” which could be used by business analysts, focused on the business requirements, the data design and the business rules. Technical specialists were needed only for interfaces to third party systems, batch processing and the like.

Dole SA's holding company were sceptical that we would succeed. We've since been to Paris to demonstrate the system to their executives who are now considering implementation in other markets.

Highlights

The new system has :

- ▶ Provided Dole SA with detailed information about their operations;
- ▶ Significantly reduced workload on staff;
- ▶ Eliminated Excel and Access systems and thus improved the integrity of data with the company;
- ▶ Improved reporting to growers and thus strengthened these relationships;
- ▶ Provided for Integrated invoicing;
- ▶ Improved quality control;
- ▶ Improved workflow control;
- ▶ Change of the focus of staff from menial tasks to value adding activities;
- ▶ Reduced environment operational costs.

"Using ViaData's Catalyst, we have achieved far more functionality and value from our information system than we thought possible when we started the project. Not only that, but the project was delivered on time and within budget. We now have a significant competitive advantage thanks to Catalyst. This is how IT projects should be."

- Gerald Gant, MD of Dole SA.

ViaData continues to enhance Dole's ERP system and incorporate peripheral systems. Since commencing implementation of the system, Dole's business environment, personnel and processes have undergone many changes while the flexibility of the system developed by ViaData has ensured that it has remained virtually unchanged. The system has proved so successful that Dole has appointed ViaData as a strategic business partner.

As for the future, I am extremely optimistic. I believe we have now laid the foundation for future growth and expansion and that Dolfin [the Dole SA system based on Catalyst] will position us to adapt to our rapidly changing industry far faster than our competitors.

- Gerald Gant, MD, Dole SA.

About ViaData

ViaData develops powerful software applications for businesses wanting a fully customised solution that can be deployed rapidly and cost-effectively. Core to the success of the company is the software technology it has created that radically shortens and simplifies software development cycles through the use of a Business Systems Engine. The Catalyst engine leverages the power of industry-standard SQL database environments to reduce project times from months or years to just days or weeks.

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