



Digging DEEP

A mammoth project, spread across hundreds of locations, translated into a daunting risk of exploring a new domain expertise for Orient Technologies

By Yogesh Gupta Illustration by Unnikrishnan AV

IN 2007, to centralize its systems and processes, Ambuja Cements Limited (ACL) decided to implement SAP's ERP solution. Switzerland-based Holchim Group, ACL's parent company, mandated that its Indian operations standardize their IT platform across the country. "We wanted to implement SAP's solution in our environment, set up new network infrastructure across 120 cement dumps in remote locations, and upgrade networks at 80 plus branch offices, factories, and regional sales offices," recalls Bihag Lalaji, Vice President - Special Projects, ACL. "The colossal project of upgrading their entire network had a one-year timeline," reminisces Ajay Sawant, MD, Orient Technologies. "However, this 'Connect India' project was not as simple as it sounds. It was not just another fulfillment order for a national solution provider like us," admits Sawant.

A total of 10 factories, 44 branches and regional sales offices, and 140 dump locations, having a 10/100 Mbps network, were migrated to 1 Gbps. The architecture was connected over WAN networks, through service providers like Tata, Bharti and Tulip, thus avoiding even a single point of failure. The Rs 10 crore project went live on August 1, 2008, across ACL's 200 plus locations.

BEYOND TECHNOLOGY

The core intention of the project was to monitor, report, and integrate day-to-day operations across ACL's nationwide offices. The earlier infrastructure at ACL was decentralized and running on 8 different systems. "About 2500 SAP licenses were bought on an all-India basis to ensure a standardized platform. Redundancy and reliability flowing through infrastructure was also crucial. Once Orient Technologies was on board, we made it clear that whatever solution we built would have to sustain for at least the next 4 to 5 years," says Lalaji.

However, the real challenge was to build a terminal or a cabinet enclosing computers, printers, etc, especially at the dumps. "We wanted a dust-free, compact, and Internet-enabled enclosure, as the biggest issue at our sites is dust and dirt," says Lalaji. Depending

Case File

Key parties: Orient Technologies, Ambuja Cements, Cisco, Emerson, Epson, HP, IBM, Kirloskar, Lenovo, Microtek, SAP, Systimax

Locations: 200+, across India

Implementation time: 12 months

Major Components: Servers, switches, routers, passive networking, PCs, UPS, printers, inverters, diesel generators

Key Activities: Systems integration, infrastructure management, project management, FMS

Post Implementation ROI: Centralized network infrastructure, scalable architecture, increased business efficiency

on specific requirements across locations, both teams at Orient and ACL finalized an innovative product. The kiosk-like enclosures, that had slide-out keyboards with a small tubelight for employees to work at night, were powered by an inverter in case of power failure, says Sawant. Internet connectivity was also mapped, as dumps on single computers were linked on VSATs, while branches and factories continued to be on the MPLS network. "During the project, we added one more ISP to the existing one to add redundancy. Additional LAN infrastructure was also added at some locations," says Lalaji.

The entire network architecture was built on Systimax for passive network-

ing and Cisco for active components like L2 / L3 switches and routers. A key technology requirement was instant switching of routers, from a failed MPLS connection to another, remembers Lalaji. For managing this massive network, a tool, called 'What's Up Gold', was used for network, bandwidth, hard disk, memory, and CPU utilization monitoring. Alerts could also be set for the various components in the network, informs Sawant.

Once the kiosk design was finalized, Orient engaged with a dozen-odd laborers in each of the 100-odd cities to dig earthing pits. Moreover, special platforms for diesel generators were to be created. In total, about 800 earthing pits were dug at branches and dumps. "There were some real challenges in this as there were many products and services like supplying kiosks and DG (diesel generator) sets and digging earthing pits; which we had never done before," admits Sawant.

What prompted Orient to stretch its capabilities as an IT solution provider? "It was a well thought-out decision, not an instant one. The main objective was to reciprocate the confidence that the customer had in our ability to handle the project. Secondly, this was the first challenging infrastructure project that we were about to execute. This project would propel us to the position of being a complete infrastructure partner for our customers," says Sawant.

ACL chipped in with its bit like negotiating with Kirloskars for DG sets. "We wanted a single point of contact so that we would not need to chase different vendors for numerous products, across 200 locations. With very limited time at our hands, we wanted



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■ CASE STUDY

Orient to be accountable for all activities,” says Lalaji.

NUTS & BOLTS

Apart from an in-house ERP system to maintain inventory and logistics needed for this project, Orient Technologies chalked down immediate steps to ensure success. Even before Orient got the project, it created a core team to handle it consisting of a project manager, a project coordinator, and a logistics coordinator, with each having people for redundancy.

“Everybody had well-defined roles and responsibilities. We also ensured that we had all the necessary documents required for all-India dispatches. We had frequent meetings with the entire team for project review,” says Sawant. There was also one director monitoring the project, along with Ritesh Shukla, GM, Orient Technologies, who was instrumental in driving the project. “Before the execution of the project we had a meeting with all the vendors to ensure that there was no delay in terms of availability



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of materials, including the logistics provider for delivery of materials on time,” recalls Sawant.

The logistics of the kiosk manufacturer in Pune was also kept in sync with digging of pits and delivery of IT products. Ensuring no breakages of kiosks during transit was a major concern. “Any delays would have led to loss of precious time, as we were

almost running against time for this project,” states Sawant.

SMOOTH ROLL OUT

POCs were very important, especially across locations (dumps) where there was no infrastructure. Depending on the type of location and the IT upgrade required, POCs were different, and were efficiently handled by the Orient team, says Lalaji.

“Apart from integration, implementation, project management, and infrastructure management, we recruited qualified personnel for facility management, in consultation with ACL. We have 80 engineers, residing at various locations of ACL, to manage sites across the country,” says Sawant.

Lalaji is appreciative of the fact that Orient Technologies worked with them as a partner rather than an IT vendor. “Sitting on the same side of the table, we jointly negotiated with various vendors. Orient, being a vendor-agnostic solution provider, gave us an ocean of choices,” he says. While negotiating with vendors, we got a lot of new ideas that helped us standardize and tweak some specifications according to the requirements of various locations, he adds.

THE ROAD AHEAD

“With the networks well in place at ACL, we now need to rationalize them further,” feels Lalaji. He points out that some VSATs were redundant due to bandwidth cost, and hence needed to be removed. “The entire organization upgrading to a single system was a major goal as it aligned with our parent company’s specifications. The ROI from the project has to be more in context of business impacts,” he says.

Orient Technologies learnt many an invaluable lesson from this project. Moreover, this huge and complete infrastructure project would act as a referral order for other customers. “We still need to improve documentation and work on project logistics to further reduce the lead time for delivery,” admits Sawant. “But, we never thought that the project was too big for us and our team had the confidence to match up to customer expectations,” he sums up. ■

THE LOYALTY EQUATION

IMPLEMENTING phase one of the ‘Connect India’ project at ACL was just the beginning of a long-term association between Orient Technologies and ACL. Since August 2008, the solution provider has executed repeat orders worth 20 percent of the initial order. “The recurring business is very important and we are ensuring that we keep enough stocks for immediate delivery so that deadlines are met. Besides, execution is assigned to the same project team each time,” says Ajay Sawant, MD, Orient Technologies.

ACL has been purchasing IT equipment and solutions from Orient Technologies since 2004-2005. Bihag Lalaji, VP - Special Projects, ACL, recalls the support provided by the Orient team during the July 2005 floods in Mumbai. About 150 desktops and laptops at the ACL office at Kalina were damaged. “Apart from other vendors, Orient immediately sent us a consignment of more than 150 PCs from HP. They did not wait for a formal purchase order, as delivery was crucial. This gesture

from Orient strengthened our bond with them,” recalls Lalaji fondly.

The ‘Connect India’ project was also discussed with a couple of other SIs, says Lalaji. However, the ability of the Orient team to implement projects successfully tilted the final order in their favor. “Our team shared a comfort level with Orient’s team. The relationship of the IT solution provider and the end user has to be favorable for both sides, in order that it lasts a long time. A loyal solution partner also has added pressure to ensure that the long-term relationship does not break,” admits Lalaji. According to him, the fact that the project went live almost two weeks before the deadline speaks volumes about Orient’s strong commitment.

After 2008, apart from maintenance work, Orient has been engaged in expanding networks across new locations. “This project fostered our relationship with ACL and established our capabilities as an infrastructure provider, rather than just a mere IT supplier,” says a beaming Sawant.