

# Manufacturer partners with Microsoft Consulting Services for global ERP overhaul

Microsoft Services  
Consulting



Customer: Lifetime Products  
Website: [www.lifetime.com](http://www.lifetime.com)  
Customer Size: 1500 employees  
Country or Region: Global  
Industry: Process, Lean and Discrete Manufacturing

#### Customer Profile

Founded in 1986, Lifetime Products is the world's leading manufacturer of blow-molded polyethylene folding chairs and tables, picnic tables, and home basketball equipment. The company also applies cutting-edge technology in plastics and metals to develop home storage solutions, chairs and benches, outdoor furniture, playground equipment, and more.

#### Software and Services

- Microsoft Consulting Services
- Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012

#### Microsoft Consulting Services

Microsoft Consulting Services is a global team of professionals who are dedicated to helping customers maximize the value of their investment in Microsoft software. Microsoft Services touches customers more than 715 million times a year, helping them plan, deploy, support and optimize our technologies. They also work closely with Microsoft partners by sharing their technological expertise and product knowledge on a regular basis.

For more information about Microsoft Services, go to:  
[www.microsoft.com/services](http://www.microsoft.com/services)

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John Bowden, CIO, Lifetime Products

Founded in 1986, Lifetime Products is the world's leading manufacturer of blow-molded polyethylene folding chairs and tables, picnic tables, and home basketball equipment. The company also applies cutting-edge technology in plastics and metals to develop home storage solutions, chairs and benches, outdoor furniture, playground equipment, and more. Lifetime's products are sold in Walmart stores as well as Sam's Club, Costco, and other large retail chains. The company's more than 1500 employees work in the Clearfield, Utah corporate headquarters and additional sites in China, Mexico, and other locations around the globe.

#### Business Needs

Working with large retailers like Walmart and Costco demands lean, smart processes, especially in areas governed by Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, including global manufacturing, inventory management and shipping. As

Lifetime Products' twenty year-old ERP system was showing its limitations and reaching end-of-life, the company embarked on a five-year plan to replace its ERP platform and products with a more robust, flexible and efficient system.

Having worked with Microsoft products and Microsoft Consulting Services since 1999, Lifetime leaned toward Microsoft products, solutions and support for this engagement. However, they also investigated other options. “We looked at four different systems,” said John Bowden, Lifetime Products CIO. “One was a progress based system that was kind of just like our previous ERP system. The others were SAP and Oracle. Then Microsoft Dynamics AX 2012.”

Lifetime found the SAP and Oracle system to be, according to Bowden, “pretty strict and hardened” platforms that didn’t work well inside a standardized Microsoft environment. The company chose Dynamics AX for its flexibility and configurability, its ability to integrate seamlessly into Lifetime’s Windows environment, and the desire to continue the longstanding relationship with Microsoft Consulting Services. “We wanted to have that really tight partnership between Microsoft Consulting Services and the product group itself. I think we were able to accomplish that, versus having a value-added reseller in between,” Bowden explained. “That gives you one throat to choke or one hand to shake. You’re not making this so complex by having all of these layers of people involved.”

The scope of the ERP replacement program made Lifetime especially wary of unnecessary complexities. They planned not only to replace the entire ERP system, but to integrate data from multiple lines of business, including CRM, product lifecycle management (PLM), and accounting—from all over the globe. They also had to ensure ISO 9001 compliance for manufacturing and payment card industry (PCI) compliance for merchants that accept credit cards. It was an exhaustive, 5-year replacement plan that impacted the entire business, demanding in-depth planning, clear communication across multiple stakeholders, seamless implementation, and ongoing support.

## Solution

“We have just finished a 2.5 year implementation of Microsoft Dynamics AX with very in-depth help from Microsoft

Consulting Services,” said CIO Bowden. The implementation process began with Lifetime creating a team to identify business needs and challenges.

“We took the positions of nine people in the organization and turned them into what we call ‘core team members,’” Bowden explained. “That meant that they became full time business analysts for Dynamics AX during a particular planning phase. Then we complimented them with Microsoft Consulting Services technical and functional consultants to help get through the implementation.”

These Microsoft consultants went well beyond the usual planning functions. They came on-site six months prior to the project kickoff to learn about the company and its culture. “Those consultants lived with us for two and a half years,” said Bowden. “They took us through a process Microsoft calls Microsoft Sure Step, which is functional design documentation and technical design documentation, overseen by a full blown project manager, who is still on-site.”

The Microsoft consultants even joined the internal core team members on a trip to China to better understand Lifetime’s global needs and operations. In addition, they oversaw additional consultants from buyers important to Lifetime who functioned as subject matter experts. Lifetime chose to keep the external consultants under Microsoft supervision because it furthered their goal of single source accountability. “In the end,” Bowden said, “there is only one person responsible for the results.”

While both internal staff and external customers use Lifetime’s ERP system, the primary focus was on internal users. To minimize risk, nothing was left to chance in ensuring that the system would work for them.

“Microsoft Consulting led internal users through the process called Test Scripts, which means that they prove they can do their jobs in the system,” Bowden said.

“Users spent very many late nights to make sure that could happen. It took months. Everyone really pulled together. We even created an AX Go-Live Banner. Everybody signed that banner at the beginning of the project and everybody signed it at the end. We wouldn’t go live until everybody decided that we were ready.”

Microsoft Consulting Services implemented the Lifetime Products Dynamics AX solution on time, on budget, and, per Bowden, “on quality.” For all of that, Bowden credits exceptional teamwork between Microsoft consultants, external consultants managed by Microsoft, and his internal team members. “I guess it goes without saying that the better the teamwork, the easier the information flows. Working together more efficiently was the end result.”

## Benefits

In reviewing the engagement with Microsoft Consulting Services, Bowden cites accountability, subject matter expertise, and teamwork as principal benefits. In those attributes he finds the roots of all the specific benefits the company has reaped from the engagement and the resulting Dynamics AX implementation.

### Single point of contact and accountability

Microsoft Consulting Services oversaw architecture review, design review and performance review for Lifetime’s Dynamics AX implementation, as well as overseeing internal corporate teams. Microsoft even assumed full responsibility for the performance of third party contractors. “You put them under Microsoft Consulting Services’ umbrella,” Bowden explained, “and it allows Microsoft to be responsible for the results of that particular resource and the things that he or she gives us.”

This centralized system enabled seamless transitions from one stage of development to the next, and facilitated clear, simplified communications between internal and external stakeholders and teams.

### Maximizing cross-company consistency in behavior and use models

The age and inflexibility of the previous ERP system led some company offices to develop independent solutions and processes. "At the beginning of this project, China was somewhat separate from the US in terms of how they ran their business," Bowden said. "Microsoft consulting helped us use Dynamics AX as an element of discipline to make sure that China, Mexico and the US all ran very smoothly on one instance of AX."

This new cohesion, structure and discipline have resulted in reduced time to market, increased transaction speed, and a greater level of flexibility across the entire organization.

### **Better inventory management and lean processes to lower production costs**

Microsoft Consulting Services deployed Dynamics AX modules to help Lifetime control inventory and maximize efficiency. Lifetime now tracks inventory in real time, limiting excess and cutting production costs. "It lets us keep inventory levels efficient," said Bowden.

### **Automated workflow and streamlined business processes leading to improved customer service**

Lifetime is using Dynamics AX to improve the workflow in its customer service department, which takes calls for things like assembly issues or defective or broken parts. "For example," Bowden explained, "with a basketball system, Lifetime manufacturers get a bill of materials for all of the parts of the system. From that bill of material, there are many workflow steps that have to be completed before those materials can go into production and make a system. Dynamics AX is helping facilitate the whole thing, including the approval process, the workflow, and the steps between one department and the next."

Microsoft Consulting Services Dynamics AX implementation lets Lifetime monitor a bill of materials' progress throughout the manufacturing process and then through sales. If customer service hears consistent feedback about the product, they can track back through the entire chain and make

adjustments to improve the product, and therefore the customer experience.

Bowden says that Lifetime now has an ERP system it can trust, implemented and supported by trusted partners in Microsoft Consulting Services. "The more trust in resources that our company has, the better results you are going to get," he concluded.