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Technology Tailors a Solution For Marine Uniform Alterations

MILITARY: Outdated Process Gets a Needed Upgrade With New App

■ By TOM YORK

Like the Marines, **Zac Shira** needed a few good men.

Shira, a partner in the **A Sonabend Co.**, which alters uniforms for Marine recruits in the late stages of basic training, was looking for a way to automate a very traditional and very time-consuming process.

The family-owned business alters 400,000 pieces of clothing each year for 17,000 to 20,000 young men and women.

The measurements are taken on site at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego and the company handles alterations for Marines based at other sites west of the Mississippi.

"We did all of the data entry by hand," said Shira, who is the third generation to be involved in the 55-year-old family business. "It was a nightmare."

Photo courtesy of A Sonabend Co.

A Marine recruit stands in front of a tailor from A Sonabend Co. who enters alteration data into a tablet computer. The system is an app that replaces a 50-year-old paper process with a 21st century digital application.

Automated Front to Back

So, Shira turned to **Steve Kozyk**, CEO of website design firm **ITegrity Web Technologies Inc.**, who enlisted the help of Sanjiv Prabhakaran, CEO of custom mobile software developer Bytes Inc., to automate the process from front to back.

"We spent many hours, and many months on the project," said Shira.

But the app, titled "eboardsheet," is a hit with the military, not to mention A Sonabend.

"The Marines just love it," Shira said. "They love having access to the work."

He said that the prime reason he decided to automate was the looming competition, not to mention the headache of doing all of that data entry by hand.

Better Accounting

Moreover, the Marines weren't happy with the fact that the accounting lagged behind in time ranging from two weeks to two months, he said.

"Now, they have access to the work at the end of every day," Shira said. "They can look at the process a hundred different ways."

ITegrity's Kozyk said his biggest challenge was taking a 50-year-old paper method and converting that into a 21st century digital application.

His company has written numerous smartphone applications but none as challenging as developing eboardsheet.

"This project was unique," he said, "in terms of how it was used."

He said the app differs from consumer apps in that it is an industrial strength product used daily.

Process Was Elaborate

"It's quite different," said Kozyk. This was his first military related project.

Bytes' Prabhakaran said his biggest challenge was creating a good workflow.

"The process they were doing was elaborate; trying to figure out how to translate that into a tiny 10-inch tablet was daunting."

He said the tablet replaces a three-foot by four-foot sheet of paper that features a "massive matrix" of 70 to 80 measurements.

"So the trick was to take that matrix with the alterations on one side and the names on the other side and put that on

a tablet," said Prabhakaran. "We had to do several rounds of iterations before we nailed it down."

The Marines are most particular among military branches about the appearance of its uniformed personnel, so it's proving to be a great beta test, for potential growth of his company, Shira said.

He's confident that many civilian and government agencies with close to 138 million in uniform could benefit from the app.

Made to Measure, a trade magazine, says the market generated total sales of $11.7 billion in 2008, and will grow to $14.5 billion in 2015. Alterations and tailoring represent a big chunk of that market.

Shira said now that task has been accomplished of automating an outmoded process, he expects Sonabend to land another contract when the bidding comes up in 2014.

"When I submitted the bid for our last contract, we still did it by hand," Shira said. "But I realized that we would have to change, that we would have to automate the process. I think we have accomplished that."