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Furniture Giant Snubs Oracle, Taps IBM Platform for B2B Portal

by **Lauren Gibbons Paul**, Contributing Editor

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IBM and a systems integration partner today disclosed their roles in helping Haworth Inc., a \$1.26 billion office furniture manufacturer, create a secure extranet for its dealers -- after an 18-month effort using Oracle Corp. technology proved unsuccessful.

IBM and its partner Ascendant Technology (Austin, TX) helped Haworth (Holland, MI) implement the portal, called dNet, which enables the furniture maker's 360 worldwide dealers to access product marketing materials, place orders, manage their accounts, view reports and check price agreements. dNet is based on IBM WebSphere Portal and IBM Lotus Workplace for Web Content Management.

Operational since last June, the self-service portal has significantly reduced the amount of time Haworth customer service agents spend researching mundane requests. Now, they use their time to provide higher level service to the dealers while the portal handles routine inquiries, the furniture company said.

The dealers, which are the exclusive channel for Haworth products, had been asking for a portal since 2001, according to Mike Stock, Haworth dNet manager. "We kept telling them it was on the way," Stock recalled. Since Haworth was already a user of Oracle technology (and continues to use Oracle database products), it began to build a portal based on Oracle

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Portal in 2002.

But the project languished for 18 months while developers tried to overcome a serious security glitch. Oracle's technology could not easily be made to work with Computer Associates Inc's eTrust SiteMinder, Haworth's Web access management product. (Oracle did not respond to requests for comment by press time.)

Forcing integration of the two systems would mean users would have to sign on multiple times to access the different portal functions. That was unacceptable to Stock and his team. A previous Haworth extranet had required users to maintain multiple passwords. "We had a mandate from our dealers to reduce the number of passwords," Stock said.

Near the end of 2003, Haworth contracted with IBM and its premier partner Ascendant to implement the new dNet. Working closely as a team, representatives from IBM, Ascendant and Haworth managed to have the portal live just one week before the most important furniture industry tradeshow of the year, Neocon, in June 2004. This was critical to Haworth, which had faced embarrassment at the previous year's show after telling dealers that the portal was not yet ready, after nearly two years of development.

"We were ecstatic. We accomplished more in just four months than we had in the previous years and with far less hassle," Stock explained.

As part of the project, Ascendant developers created a password administration and authentication process that allowed the dealers to sign on to the portal just once. They embraced dNet, for which they had waited so long. During its first seven months of existence, dNet received four million hits. "The dealers are overjoyed they can find things for themselves. They don't have to call in anymore," Stock noted.

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