
Managing Hyper-Growth

With a geometric growth in its customers' requirements and their complexity, Solution Labs found that Accept360™ was key to keeping on top of its rapidly changing business, technical, and marketing environment.

by David Wagner,
Vice President, Sales and Marketing,
Solution Labs Inc.

You've likely never heard of our company, Solution Labs. That's understandable. We're a small specialty software company simultaneously balancing the growing success of our world-class customers and our own consistent rapid growth (we've grown more than 1,000% in the last 5 years). We're also geographically dispersed to the point that no two people on our development team actually live or work in the same city. In fact, many of them live in different countries.

Our customers – Fortune 500 companies that operate massive server farms – are even more widely separated. They include such familiar names as American Express, MasterCard, Unilever, Adobe, Research In Motion, Nationwide, and Wells Fargo. Their data centers each contain as many as 30,000 physical servers – even more logical images with virtualization – and they are situated all over the world including Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Belgium, Britain, Spain, France, Mexico, Canada and the United States. It's our job to help them manage and grow those facilities in an intelligent fashion. It's called capacity management, and it's all we do. The product we've developed to make that happen is called "Performance Surveyor."

Everyone's different.

Before the company was founded in 2006, our principals spent years working as consultants, helping some very tech-savvy people prepare complex data center analyses and reports that related to issues like sizing, chargeback, capacity exceptions, consolidation, virtualization, decision support, and so on. All of them wanted to figure out what resources they really needed and when they actually

needed them in order to cost-effectively deliver acceptable levels of service to their end customers.

What we discovered, however, is that every single customer and prospect we talked to had fundamentally different requirements. On the surface, they all wanted to solve problem X. But when you peeled it back and thought about how to build a product that would actually solve problem X in a consistent, repeatable manner, their underlying functional requirements turned out to be unique – and the way people wanted that information presented was different, too.

There were also certain things they had in common; things like wanting a solution that's flexible and adaptable, with open data architecture that allowed them to feed in whatever data they already had. When you have 10,000 Servers, it isn't acceptable to tell them they have to manually install something on each and every server! So from all that, we rolled out our initial product in mid-2006. It was a web-based product, developed the old-fashion way with the initial developers using email file sharing and phone calls to push the project along. It met with initial success.

Broken tools

But those development tools didn't scale. So starting in 2007, when our growth took off, the process started to break down. About halfway through the year, we realized that there was no way we were going to maintain the necessary pace of adapting to change without a more sophisticated solution to managing the surge of product requirements. After evaluating a number of a different tool

sets, we started using Accept Corporation's Accept360 in October 2007, and it has been in use at Solution Labs ever since.

The reason why older, simpler tools can't do the job is what I call the N-factorial problem. Here's how it works: when you've got one person, the number of possible combinations is one. With two it's two. With three it's six. And next thing you know, the number of possible combinations goes up exponentially. So what happens is that you often end up with two people working on the same thing at the same time, or maybe nobody would be working on it at all. Then you have to take time out and send an email: "Hey, do you have this? Do you have that?" Here is the total anathema to the key advantage that small, nimble startups require – focus and efficiency.

Back in the late '70s and early '80s, when my career began, we used code management systems that worked mostly because we were all in the same room and could yell over the cubicle walls. But that doesn't work when you've got developers in the U.K., Canada, Massachusetts, Oklahoma and Arizona. Sometimes they're not even awake at the same time. So as we grew, we clearly needed a more coordinated system like Accept360 to capture all our requirements, to effectively plan a wide range of items over a number of releases, to capture our Intellectual Property, to communicate amongst the teams and, finally, provide senior management full visibility into our development process.

Massive change

In 2008, we faced a perfect storm of change. One was the economic situation. Over the last few years, as everyone knows, only those investments with very rapid and provable ROI stories behind them were able to capture scarce funds from tight IT budgets. Another was a seismic shift in the underlying technology of data centers; the combination of virtualization morphing into cloud computing, along with Software as a Service, completely changed the equation by which our customers wanted to analyze information and make decisions – that put a lot of pressure on our business, on our sales model, and on our development process.

For us, with every one of our developers in a different location – spanning eight time zones and three countries – it's easy to understand why we had to bring in a tool set like Accept360 to optimize our development process. Today, with 50-plus customers, well over 100,000 servers under active management, and three product releases in 2010 alone, Accept360 has become indispensable.

Finally, as our customer base matured, the analysis and reporting requirements we were getting from some of our largest customers became even more comprehensive and complex. It's a constant development challenge to balance those kinds of complicated and potentially non-reusable requirements against the need for capturing new customers whose requirements are usually different. Figuring out how to put all that into an Agile release cycle which frequently spans multiple releases and/or years, was very challenging, and Accept360 really helped us to do that. Although we have a highly complex product, we can't wait for Big Bang releases once every 18 months or two years; we'd be out of business if we weren't far more nimble than that.

A flood of data

One important feature of our solution is that we can take data from any infrastructure management solution our customers may already have deployed. We don't require them to implement our infrastructure; we simply layer on top of what they already have. That's a major sales and marketing advantage and a huge value benefit to our customers. But it creates development challenges related to the rapid expansion of new data sources that we have to integrate with our solution.

The growth in our customer base means that more and more requirements are coming in from more and more customers and from prospects as well. Before Accept360 our developers were already spending too much time collecting, tracking, and prioritizing technical requirements. And some requirements ended up falling through the cracks. For a company that needs to be nimble, adaptive, high-touch, and high quality in the services we provide, that was simply unacceptable.

The development cycle, particularly for complex products across a group of large customers, tends to be slow and complicated. You'll have any number of 'idea germs' – little light bulbs that pop up in people's heads – and they somehow have to be evaluated and potentially incorporated. But how do you manage them together so that you understand their impact on the code base? Then, of course, there's always ongoing evolution – the middle part of the development life cycle process. And that's where we've seen the largest benefit to our business model from using Accept360.

Acceptance

From the time we first evaluated Accept360, it was clear that it was easy to implement, easy to use and easy to both capture and lay out our unique data collection and information extraction requirements. In the past, Solution Labs came across tools that were hard to use. In those cases, their adoption and use rates fall off. The next thing you know, it literally becomes either a "write occasionally, read never" database, or web-based-based shelf-ware. That's why we involved our development team in the evaluation process, obtaining their buy-in that this was a solution they could – and most importantly – would, actually use. Based on their acceptance, it was very easy to see how we would get quick ROI out of it by managing our product requirements in the development process. That was the net-net reason we picked Accept360.

We started off as an incredibly small minnow; now we're a trout. But we're a fast-growing trout in a very large pond. Most of our competitors are sharks. Better and faster are literally the only ways our company has survived and, indeed, is thriving; we're in our third year of triple digit growth. Better and faster means more innovation, more quickly. It means higher quality customer interactions, not only from a support standpoint, but all the way from ideation and requirements into deciding what to build for the next release. And without a tool like Accept 360, we would never have made it.

The bottom line

I can't overstate the importance of Accept360 to our success. It has enabled us:

- To grow at warp speed: from nine Fortune 500 customers in 2007 to more than 50 today.
- To grow our revenue and profits over 300%, our installed base over 500%, and our staff by 1,000%.
- To maintain a very aggressive delivery schedule and develop feature-rich, long-term roadmaps that reach two to three major releases into the future.
- To gain more visibility into what we're doing in the next 6, 9, 12 and 18 months than our competitors, and to deliver more new functionality in a 4-month point release than our competitors do in an 18-month monolithic "Titanic" release.
- To add some important new features very late in the development process in response to rapid changes in the marketplace.
- To offer higher-quality customer interactions, all the way through from ideation to deciding what goes into the next release.
- To immensely help with collaboration involving developers in different locations across eight time zones.
- To intelligently balance the unique requirements of a large base of current customers against those needed to capture new customers.
- To free up our development staff to focus on developing software rather than on collecting, tracking, and prioritizing requirements.
- To be confident our developers would actually use it and that it would generate rapid ROI.
- To fully understand all the requirements, their relationships, and why they're important to specific customers.
- To balance business decisions that have helped further differentiate us from our competitors and shortened our time to market.
- To increase our development team's productivity by 20 to 25% or more.
- To improve accountability because we now know which of our developers is doing what, when, and for whom.

About the author

At Solution Labs, David Wagner is helping customers optimize their data center performance and capacity. He brings more than 31 years of technology experience and background in performance analysis and optimization to Solution Labs' Sales and Marketing efforts, and is responsible for growing a worldwide base of successful and satisfied customers. Prior to Solution Labs, David ran Solutions Marketing for BMC Software Virtualization, Performance and Capacity Management Solutions.

Earlier assignments included leading Data general Enterprise Management, where he was responsible for ideation and delivery of the industry's first graphical PC-based remote management console for Unix Servers and RAID storage arrays, and Stratus Computer, during which time he also served as Secretary of the Transaction Processing Performance Council (TPC) – an industry standards organization dedicated to quantifying performance efficiency.

In the early 1980's, Dave spent seven years at Digital Equipment Corporation, where in addition to being an OS Kernel Engineer, he created and delivered a series of advanced performance analysis and optimization courses to Digital's largest customers.

About Accept Software Inc.

Accept Software, Inc. delivers The Product Innovation Management solution that technology-driven companies use to decide which products to bring to market for the fastest time-to-profit. The Accept360 Suite is the only complete end-to-end software solution that tightly links company and product strategy through ideation, portfolio planning, roadmaps, requirements and execution. For more information, visit www.accept360.com

401 Congress Ave, Suite 2650,
Austin, TX 78701
512-201-8222

www.accept360.com
info@accept360.com