

Ten Years On, Hixson's ERP Solution Keeps on Giving

SUCCESS STORY

A FORCED ERP DECISION PROVES FRUITFUL FOR HIXSON

When officials at the architecture, engineering and interior design firm Hixson got word from their enterprise resource planning (ERP) software provider that the ERP system on which the firm had been relying would soon be sunset, it wasn't exactly the kind of news that a fast-growing company in the midst of digital transformation and recovering from a deep economic recession wants to hear.

"We were going to lose support for the [ERP] system we were using," recalls Christian Fasso, billing manager and project accountant at Hixson, "so we had to decide, do we stay with that unsupported system and keep our fingers crossed that something within the system wouldn't blow up, or do we see what else is out there? Ultimately, we decided we didn't want to go with a system that was unsupported."

That decision, made more than a decade ago, continues to pay significant dividends for Hixson — dividends that firm decision-makers like Fasso hardly could have foreseen when they opted to go with an ERP software solution from a then-upstart provider, rather than sticking with a bigger-name provider and its soon-to-be-orphaned legacy system, or taking the costly upgrade route with that provider.

Call it timing, luck or just good business sense, the move to Unanet ERP AE in 2010 has proven rewarding for Hixson, which ultimately got an ERP system and a business ally that continue to grow with and support the firm.

HIXSON ARCHITECTURE ENGINEERING INTERIORS

ABOUT HIXSON

Hixson Architecture, Engineering and Interiors (www.hixson-inc.com) is a Cincinnati, Ohio-based firm that has built a national reputation in four areas of specialization: food + beverage, workplace, retail and science + technology.

Founded in 1948, Hixson partners with some of the most well-recognized brands in the world, delivering insight, advocacy and intelligent project execution through 16 integrated in-house design and technical disciplines, supported by the expertise of 120 associates. This year, the firm ranked #8 on ENR's Food and Beverage Design Firms List, and among ENR's Top 30 for Industrial Design, while also landing on Commercial Construction & Renovation (CCR) Magazine's annual Top Engineering and Architecture Firms lists.



HIXSON'S ERP SOLUTION

Having decided the best course for Hixson was to find a new ERP solution rather than stick with its legacy system and provider, the panel tasked with choosing a new system for the firm narrowed the options to three, recounts Fassio, who was part of the panel.

After an exhaustive internal evaluation and external due diligence, they chose Unanet ERP AE, an ERP solution purpose-built for architecture and engineering firms — and one they were confident would scale with them, from a provider they felt assured would continue to support them through a period of sustained growth and digital transformation.

“The cost structure was appealing,” Fassio recalls, “and we saw a lot of flexibility and customization opportunities with the Unanet ERP AE solution. We also felt very comfortable with the Unanet team.”

Since implementing Unanet ERP AE, Hixson has taken full advantage of its expanding array of capabilities, functionalities, and automations, including:

- Automated paperless invoicing.
- Analytics dashboards for real-time visibility into project status and resource deployment.
- Resource scheduling capabilities to manage people and their workloads more efficiently.
- Interactive Actions, wizard-style tools to help quickly and easily add projects, clients, etc., streamline workflows, and automate the flow of data across the firm.
- Extensive customizations that track to the firm's department-centric structure and workflows.

IMPACT

In Unanet ERP AE, Hixson has a long-term ERP solution that consistently delivers a range of benefits to the firm, and its project, HR, accounting, and finance teams, including:

- **BETTER HIRING, GROWTH AND RESOURCE DECISION-MAKING.**

Real-time project insight and resource scheduling tools enable project managers and departmental decision-makers to see how projects are tracking from a resources standpoint relative to budget, then scale project teams accordingly. Having a better handle on resource needs is helping to streamline the firm's resource scheduling and improving its forecasting, which ultimately results in better-informed hiring and growth decision-making.

- **A CLEARER, MORE ACCURATE PICTURE OF PROJECTS IN PROGRESS.**

Dashboard-based analytics powered by real-time project data provide project decision-makers and employees with **A SINGLE, EASY-TO-NAVIGATE ENVIRONMENT** in which to track a huge range of project-specific and firm-wide data, including budget, production planning and project labor, then gauge it versus Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

"It enables us to get in front of issues before they become problematic," says Fasso. What's more, those advanced analytics capabilities make it easy to model scenarios such as potential projects or scope changes to see how they impact resource deployment, notes Joseph Kobos, Hixson's Operations Process

Manager. "The analytics are the bread and butter of how we manage our business. **WE CAN SEE THE TRENDS AND MAKE DECISIONS ACCORDINGLY**, without having to go through a bunch of spreadsheet gymnastics to get there."

- **NON-LINEAR GROWTH, the result of SIGNIFICANT EFFICIENCY GAINS ACROSS THE BUSINESS.**

Adding value to clients and increasing firm revenue without increasing headcount is the holy grail for an A/E business, particularly nowadays. With the ability to automate key functions like production planning, resource scheduling and invoicing that previously involved labor-intensive and often redundant paper-shuffling and data-entry, Hixson is realizing massive time savings.

On the invoicing side alone, Fasso figures the firm is **SAVING 8 HOURS PER WEEK ON AVERAGE**. "That's a big win," he says.

"It simplifies the daily operation and management of our business."



- **MORE AGILE PIPELINE MANAGEMENT**

With heightened visibility into resource deployment, schedules and available opportunity hours by department, firm decision-makers have the information they need to assess which projects they're equipped to take on, when, and with what resources.

Departments also can quickly identify and move to fill short-term schedule gaps by pulling smaller projects in from the pipeline. "It gives us the ability quickly assess, with confidence, the amount of work we can accept or how we need to alter our plans to fill future gaps," explains Kobos. **REVENUE AND CLIENT EXPERIENCE IMPROVE** as a result.

- **MORE CONSISTENT CASH FLOW**

Invoices go out by email much quicker now that the process is automated, resulting in **A NOTICEABLY STEADIER STREAM OF CASH** for the firm.

- **IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY WITH CUSTOMERS**

The ability to bring data into conversations about our workload bolsters communication and "helps protect our relationships with clients," says Fasso. "It prevents us from over-promising and helps us keep our commitments to clients."

- **TALENT MAGNETISM**

Work-life balance is an important part of the Hixson culture. Unanet's ERP provides the ability to visually identify situations where an employee is working an inordinate number of hours for a long stretch, showing employees that the firm is conscientious about helping them avoid burnout, a critical factor for attracting and retaining talent.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

How has Hixson continued to capture benefits from Unanet's ERP system, more than a decade after implementing it? Kobos and Fasso attribute the sustained success largely to these five practices:

1. Take a thoughtful, measured approach to evaluating ERP options.

Before conducting external due diligence to evaluate ERP solutions, Hixson developed a "future state map" to better understand the type of solution it would need in light of its growth aspirations.

2. Seek an ERP solution that readily supports your firm's workflows, processes, and business structure.

Hixson made sure Unanet ERP AE (Clearview) could accommodate its project-based and department-driven approach.

3. Look for opportunities to automate.

By automating clunky processes (production planning, invoicing, etc.), the firm has freed employees to focus on more fulfilling, higher-value work. That includes Fasso, who says, "If you're involved in process too much, you don't have time to analyze and plan strategically. I used to be too in the weeds. Not anymore."

4. Empower visually oriented people with visual tools.

Unanet ERP AE's highly visual, interactive dashboard-based environment for displaying data and analytic insights caters to the visual orientation of architects, designers, and engineers.

5. Find an ERP provider that treats you like a true partner.

Ongoing support and guidance from an ERP provider is as important as the ERP solution itself. "Our relationship with Unanet has been positive from day one," Fasso says. "Over the years we have developed the kind of partnership that grows together. Now, a decade in, we're still innovating and finding new ways to run our business better with Unanet."

Where Information Means Insight

Unanet is a leading provider of ERP and CRM solutions purpose-built for Government Contractors, A/E, and Professional Services. More than 3,200 project-driven organizations depend on Unanet to turn their information into actionable insights, drive better decisionmaking, and nurture business growth.

