

Case Study – Scyron

Scyron is a small business based in Birmingham, employing around ten staff, developing applications software products for the Criminal Justice sector. The company focuses on products for the capture, analysis, presentation and management of video and still images seized during police investigations and used as evidence in court.

Background

Scyron had been in business for several years, developing and selling a small range of single user desktop applications for the capture and analysis of video material, based on a patented video analysis algorithm devised by the company's founder. Following the injection of new funding, and the arrival of a new CEO, the business had ambitious plans to expand by developing new enterprise class products to facilitate the management of video and still image media across a Police Force and in collaboration with the Crown Prosecution Service.

The CEO recognised that the existing engineers, while strong technically, operated as individuals, and that in order to develop the new enterprise class products they would need to work together as a team. The extent of product functionality and the degree of integration would be far greater than it had been for the existing desktop products, with significant engineering effort needed to establish product specifications in partnership with the lead customers. Customer expectations of quality and support would be much more demanding for an enterprise class product, necessitating professional testing and support processes and a reliable IT infrastructure.

A new direction for the business was in place, with a vision and route to market established. What was missing was the operational infrastructure needed to make the vision a reality.

Challenges

The company's small engineering team had never developed product on this scale. Previously each engineer had developed their own product, working in isolation so that while each product was internally consistent, the look and feel across the product range differed and there was little integration between products.

Some of the engineers were very individualistic, talented software developers, but determined that their way was the only right way, and that their product was the way the rest of the product set should be.

The functionality of existing product was decided by the developer, with some customer and sales input, but without working with the market. The process was engineering driven, with market feedback coming only very late in the day. Development of the new enterprise products needed to be much more customer collaborative, working closely with two lead customers to establish the product requirements and to conduct beta trials.

Anamosys

Growth & Change Management
for Technology Businesses

Customers for existing products were relatively few, and tended to be individual users. Support calls would be handled directly by the developer, interrupting new product development work and creating a dependency on that particular engineer for product support. With no support agreements in place, levels of support were unpredictable, with some customers very satisfied and others left expecting more.

The company's business processes and infrastructure were not well developed, having only needed to support a small, simple product set.

- The IT infrastructure was small scale and ad hoc, having been put together on an 'as needed' basis by the engineers themselves.
- There was no process for estimating and planning work or for managing resource, and therefore no way to reliably predict delivery timescales or to assess when future work could be carried out.
- Information about customer prospects was sparse and hard to share, making it difficult to coordinate effort into the most promising areas.
- Product testing was superficial and ad hoc, carried out only by the engineer as the product was developed.

While a vision for the future was in place, the company lacked strategic direction and a product roadmap, the meat on the bones of that vision. The new funding that was in place was enough to get started, but more was needed to take the new enterprise product offering to market. To obtain the next round of funding, business and technology strategy, a product roadmap and a compelling business plan would be needed.

Solutions

Time was spent initially learning about the business, its history, its products, its people, its customers, and understanding where it wanted to go. Every business is different and this process of discovery is always needed before appropriate advice can be given.

Building the Team

Heading up engineering, the first task was to bring the existing developers together as a team rather than as a collection of individuals. Integration points between the existing products were established, and used as an opportunity to bring individual engineers together, working collaboratively across two or more products. Using real work activities to facilitate process and behaviourally change makes new ways of thinking seem natural and provides practical applications of change.

The new enterprise class products would need the whole team to work together, but would also require additional capacity and expertise. This provided an opportunity to inject some new blood from outside, bringing in engineers who understood how to work in a team and whose new expertise could convince existing staff of the merits of sharing responsibility for different aspects of the product amongst the right experts.

Development of the new product range gave the opportunity to paint a compelling picture to the engineers of the creation of something new and significant. Exciting and worthwhile to be part of but significant enough in size to be beyond the capacity and capability of any one of them. Those members of the team who had an aptitude for it were set to work with the customer to define product requirements, playing to their desires to have significant input into the way things should be while at the same time teaching the value of real market input.

Product testing was an area where the existing team lacked the necessary expertise. Instead, the infrastructure, processes and specifications needed were put together alongside the functional specifications by the newly recruited team members. Doing these things together provided a way to introduce the team to Test Driven Development and promoted deeper and earlier thinking about product quality.

Improving IT

Early new recruitment was for IT, customer support and product testing skills. Quite a wide combination, but skills that with careful selection can be found together in the same person. In a larger organisation these areas would have been covered by separate people, but a business the size of Scyron could not justify the head count. Recruiting to cover all three areas represented the beginnings of three specialist teams, creating opportunity for the new recruit as well as filling multiple capability needs for the business.

Having an IT specialist on board enabled the engineers to relinquish this responsibility. Most were happy to do so, others needed to see the benefits of more professional IT infrastructure, and experience fewer distractions to their development effort, before being convinced. As well as the obvious benefits of a secure, backed-up, and reliable IT system, having a specialist in place enabled Scyron to provide a more credible response to sales bids, and the meet the demanding criteria expected of enterprise wide IT system deployments.

Improving Customer Support

Customer support was channelled through a new dedicated function. The engineers were still on hand to offer second line support, but distractions were considerably reduced, and someone else in the business as well as the developer knew how to support the products. Establishing a support function allowed customer support to be formalised with the introduction of an SLA and annual maintenance contracts, a great revenue opportunity for the business.

Growing out of the new customer support function, as it gained experience and expertise, it became possible to offer product training, creating professional training collateral and delivering formal training to customers. This was a necessary component of the new enterprise class product offering, it provided a new revenue stream for existing products, and a way to handle some of the more difficult customer support issues.

Improving Product Testing

Developer testing is part of the task of engineering any software, but with test infrastructure and specifications in place, and focussed resource available, independent black box product testing was now possible. Product quality increased significantly as a result, with corner cases being examined and regression problems becoming a thing of the past. Customer acceptance testing, necessary for enterprise class products, then became just a natural extension to this.

"Peter joined Scyron at a pivotal time in the company's growth. Having expanded rapidly within the digital evidence management systems space, Scyron had entered a phase when re-alignment of the engineering team and Scyron's software solutions were required in order to scale the company and meet the ever-increasing demands of the market-place. Peter pulled together the team drawing on each individual's area of expertise to create a common purpose. This approach enabled Scyron to deliver a robust, credible roadmap in perfect alignment to the strategic goals of its customers."

– Corinne Cassidy, Channel Sales Director, Scyron

Projects, Planning and Predicting the Future

Requirements capture and specification, team product development, customer interaction, professional testing, these are all aspects of an engineering project, and this is the vehicle that Anamosys put in place at Scyron. Working against a plan allowed delivery schedules to be published so that the lead customers could be kept up to date and so that their input would be available on time to the development team. This became particularly important during beta testing and final delivery, when interactions were many and complex.

As well as providing schedule information, the project approach allowed costs (mainly effort in this case) to be managed, important when investment capital was being spent and the next funding round was looming. Effort information enabled resource usage to be planned allowing us to sketch out the projects coming next and to schedule product enhancements and new product releases, the beginnings of a product roadmap.

Scyron was now growing, and with more people, some of whom were out on the road selling, effort was needed to keep everyone on the same page. Having a professional IT infrastructure helped with this, enabling information about sales prospects, products and project deliverables to be organised and shared easily across the business without the overhead of push processes.

Strategy for Further Funding

With the development of the new enterprise class products well underway, with much closer relationships in place with the lead customers, and with more and better technical expertise recruited into the engineering team, we were able to start looking to the future. Working with the CEO and the Sales Director, Anamosys developed a strategy for the business and a

Anamosys

Growth & Change Management
for Technology Businesses

product roadmap, and using the now established project planning and resource management processes, painted a realistic picture of timeframe.

These same planning processes allowed us to construct a financial plan for the business which Anamosys put together ahead of the appointment of a new Finance Director. This financial plan became the foundation for the next funding round, working the strategy and product roadmap into a compelling business case which was presented to potential investors.

"I valued my time spent working with Peter at Scyron. I was able to see first-hand how Peter diplomatically and effectively created change within the product team. He successfully implemented the changes - within personnel and product roadmaps - to raise Scyron to the next level commercially. These changes helped Scyron to secure extra funding in a challenging financial climate and ultimately to a successful acquisition by Centerprise."

– Corinne Cassidy, Channel Sales Director, Scyron

About Anamosys

Anamosys enables business growth within smaller technology companies by helping them to organise and to scale. For start-up businesses this is about bridging a gap, enabling a small band of enthusiastic and passionate individuals to become a professional, sustainable and growing team. For more established businesses it is about making the organisational change needed to move to the next level.

We can provide assistance with:

- Mentoring and coaching of the management team in organisation, scalability and growth strategies.
- Creation and roll out of appropriate business processes and infrastructure.
- Handling multiple concurrent customers and projects, and significant information and resources.
- Change management needed to transition from a small to a medium sized enterprise.
- Effective communication and people management needed to shift team thinking and behaviour.

Get In Touch

To learn more about the help we can offer please contact Peter Cain by phone on:

07949 029686 or **01594 517142**

or by email at:

peter.cain@anamosys.co.uk