

# A New FOCUS

## Focal Point shines in worker productivity and contentment

By Jim Utsler

All too often, technology drives how business processes work, and employees become trapped within the strict confines of application workflow. But this type of IT-centric mindset can impede efficient operations, especially if the people interacting with systems daily have little or no input regarding what functionality they think would benefit the bottom line.

One company that has taken that lesson to heart is the specialty-lighting manufacturer Focal Point. Working with business partner CNX Corporation, as well as an internal team that included IT personnel and general business support staff, the company developed an entirely new application that significantly improved how order entry is conducted.

As a result, Focal Point's streamlined order-entry processes have significantly improved productivity, reduced new-hire training and, no less important, made order-entry staff much happier. As Margaret Duhon, former director of IT and now secretary-treasurer

with Focal Point, explains, "I didn't like watching my customer-service department stare at their computer screens all day long and click away on their keyboards. It wasn't an efficient use of their time. They were fielding calls from agents and trying to concentrate on entering orders at the same time. They needed help, and from my point of view, that's what IT's there for."

### Creating a Monster

Headquartered in Chicago, the family-owned Focal Point was founded in 1995 as an architectural lighting manufacturer. According to Duhon, "Our vertically

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Focal Point's headquarters double as a lighting showcase, giving employees a great place to work. Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Duhan says workers also love a new ordering system.



# To see processes becoming **more efficient**

integrated manufacturing facilities are fine-tuned to produce high-quality products and short lead times. And by using the most advanced equipment and processes, we deliver a superior lighting product.”

Focal Point’s customers include such companies as AT&T and Microsoft, which use Focal Point products to “give their offices a modern, high-end look,” Duhon says.

Typically, Focal Point marketing employees will come up with ideas for new fixtures based on specific requirements, such as the amount of lighting needed in proposed installations. They then work with design engineers to meet those requirements, but with a distinctively creative flair. Once a design has been approved, product specialists will dive into the practical details, such as which parts will be needed during the manufacturing process.

The majority of Focal Point’s customers are distributors who work with job-site contractors. Once a distributor has struck a deal with a contractor, it will place an order through an independent agent representing Focal Point. Any related sales are reported back to Focal Point, which then manufactures and ships the requested lighting to the job site.

Most of the order requests are sent to Focal Point via e-mail, and customer-service representatives key them into the company’s order-entry application. In the past, this was done using the

order-entry module built into the BPCS ERP suite, which runs on Focal Point’s IBM Power\* 520 running IBM i. But that module had been heavily modified to accommodate the company’s complex agent-commissioning processes and unit shipment requirements.

As Duhon explains, “There are commissions we have to make sure the agents get. And sometimes there may be more than one agent involved in a sale, such as a specifying agent and a territorial agent. You have to split commissions to represent that. That was a complicated process that had to be dealt with when orders came in—and we had to modify BPCS to take those cases into account.”

Additionally, Focal Point often ships its products linearly, by the foot, according to how the end users order them, even though those products might contain, for example, eight starter units and eight end units. The company invoices for the total length but the packing slip must reflect many individual components.

“What we’re trying to do was be as easy to do business with as possible, so we’d invoice the distributor for the full run, but then have to break it down so the person on the job site would know which components were actually being received,” Duhon says. “So along the way, we’d make changes to the BPCS order-entry module to accommodate for any changes we made in how we did business. In the end, we’d created a monster.”

When the company was first established, it had two order-entry people on its payroll, so these issues weren’t really a big deal. These staff members understood the company and its commissioning and order-fulfillment processes. But as the company began to grow and new data-entry personnel were hired, training on this system became increasingly complex and took weeks to complete.

“You know that old saying about thinking out of the box?” Duhon asks. “Well, I knew I had to do that, because it shouldn’t take 10, 15 minutes to enter basic information. And a little voice in my head kept saying, ‘We could be doing this more efficiently and a lot smarter.’ So I knew things had to be much more streamlined. I just wasn’t sure how to get there.”

## A Special Breed

Thankfully, Duhon had a relationship with CNX Corporation, whose staff did know how. Focal Point had been using CNX’s ATOMIC (Automated Total Order Management and Inventory Control) for several years to handle its manufacturing execution and inventory control and tie that back to BPCS. So it wasn’t a great leap for the company to also look at CNX’s Valence to create an entirely new order-entry application that integrates with BPCS.

“I’ve been working with programmers for close to 20 years, and I’ve never met anyone like the people at CNX. They’re a special breed. That someone can come in and sit with your order-entry people and then come back with an entirely new program simply blows me away,” Duhon says. “And I can e-mail them at any time, sometimes 1 or 2 a.m., and still get a response. I ask them, ‘When do you sleep?’ Apparently, they don’t.”

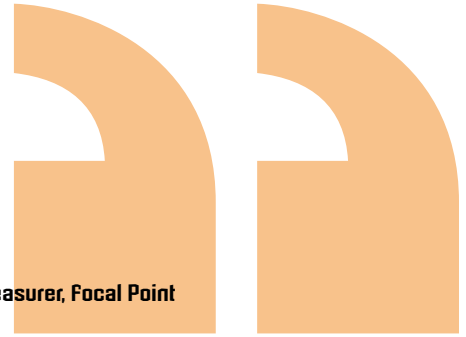
That dedication to customer needs has manifested itself

## UP CLOSE

Customer:	Focal Point LLC
Headquarters:	Chicago
Business:	Designer and manufacturer of high-end commercial lighting products
Challenge:	Improving worker productivity and contentment
Solution:	Using Valence from CNX Corporation to build a new order-entry system
Hardware:	IBM Power 520 running IBM i
Software:	BPCS ERP suite and CNX’s ATOMIC and Valence

# before your eyes is really **rewarding.**

—Margaret Duhon, secretary-treasurer, Focal Point



## Bright Ideas at Work

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hen Focal Point recently moved its offices to a new building across the street from its manufacturing facility, it decided to light it up with its own products, creating a unique sales tool.

“Our new 35,000-square-foot office space serves not only as our office headquarters, but also as a product showcase, sales tool and training environment. We put state-of-the-art lighting in our offices, kitchen and bathrooms, in every hallway, and in our showroom,” Focal Point Secretary-Treasurer Margaret Duhon says. “Now, we can bring customers in, show them how they can use Focal Point’s lighting fixtures in practical settings and then take them to our plant to show them how the lights are made. This works out very well from a sales point of view, as well as from an everyday-use point of view, because our employees have a great place to work.”

—J.U.

in Focal Point’s new order-entry system, especially once Duhon began encouraging various customer-service team leaders to get involved in development. If, for instance, someone wanted a pop-up screen, he or she would likely get it. This included an example when people would have two green screens and an Excel spreadsheet open, all to handle one order. Now, all of that is on one user-friendly, Web-based screen, with much of

the input automatically diverted to wherever it’s intended to go.

Of course, the development of this new order-entry application didn’t happen overnight, although, according to Duhon, it seemed like it. The process began in February 2008, when CNX sat down with customer-service super users to create initial specifications. Concurrently, CNX began analyzing the modified BPCS order-entry application and breaking it down into individual service-component procedures. Those procedures, with their ties back into BPCS intact, were then rewritten as part of the new application.

By June, the application was ready for testing. A select group of users reviewed it for several weeks and made suggestions for further enhancements and refinements. In October, the application went live for several representatives who began using it to enter active orders, each of which was carefully monitored for data integrity. Three months later, in January 2009, the whole data-entry staff had transitioned and began entering all of their orders into the new system.

Now, the complexities of commission reporting and unit breakouts are reduced thanks to consolidated screens and streamlined workflow. Instead of spending long hours at their keyboards and entering orders on multiple screens, data-entry personnel can more easily help sales agents with orders. “If they’re sitting there all day focused solely on order entry, they can’t really do that,” Duhon says. “Now they can.” Additionally, those weeks of training related to the old system have been cut down to hours, thanks to the intuitive interface of the Valence-based application.

If that weren’t enough, Focal Point has since opened the tool to other users, including off-site sales representatives. The company used Valence to create several tools—including flow charts and pie

charts—to help regional salespeople across the country keep track of what’s going on with their agents at any moment. It’s also rolling out a new Web portal for agents to check status on their orders using this same technology. This will include ship dates, trucking-company information, and copies of packing slips and invoices. Focal Point hopes to add a quotes section and reporting section within a few months. “The capabilities are endless,” Duhon says. “All the ideas we have always dreamed about in IT are becoming reality in a short period of time. To see processes becoming more efficient before your eyes is really rewarding.”

### Satisfaction

Perhaps because it’s a small company with an eye toward not only worker productivity, but also worker satisfaction, Focal Point has realized the importance of using IT as an enabler. It could’ve kept chugging along with its modified BPCS order-entry module, but it decided that an enhanced and more streamlined application would benefit it beyond a simple bottom-line ROI.

“I see what these people do and I felt for them. That’s why we built the application,” Duhon says. “Some people were worried that we were trying to replace them, but that thought never crossed our minds. I just wanted to help them get their heads above water, and I told them that. Now, everyone’s saying, ‘This is the greatest. It saves us so much time and it can do so many things.’ They’re loving it, and they’re happier because of it—and so am I.”



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