VAI's 2024 Fall Forum: Innovations in Cloud ERP, AI, and Industry-Specific Solutions

At its 2024 Fall Forum, VAI (Vormittag Associates Inc.), a provider of enterprise resource planning (ERP) solutions for mid-market organizations in manufacturing, distribution, retail, and other industries, unveiled enhancements in its cloud ERP solutions, including AI-driven insights, industry-specific features, and better cybersecurity functionality. Attendees learn about new functionalities in VAI's S2K ERP, customer success stories, and the role of AI technologies like IBM Watsonx in business intelligence and automation. TEC Principal Analyst PJ Jakovljevic was at the event and captured all the details in the following post.

VAI (Vormittag Associates Inc.) continues to impress as one determined enterprise resource planning (ERP) software vendor with its focus and defendable niches. Since its founding in 1978, VAI has remained an independently owned provider of ERP software solutions for mid-market organizations operating in the distribution, manufacturing, retail, and service sectors. With more than 200 employees spread across the US, the vendor has over 1,500 companies and tens of thousands of users worldwide using VAI's S2K ERP software solutions.

VAI began as a regional IBM Business Partner and ERP software developer for small to midsize businesses (SMBs) in the New York area, with headquarters in Ronkonkoma, New York. Over the years, it has expanded with additional offices across the United States but maintains a global presence in regions where it does not directly sell through a network of resellers.

VAI customer base spans various industries, with a focus on retail point-of-sale (POS) and distribution-intensive industries—including automotive; pet supply; medical; plastics; industrial; janitorial distribution; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC); plumbing and heating; and more. Today, VAI's cloud-based ERP product lines—including S2K Enterprise (for general hardgoods), S2K Food, and S2K Pharma—offer a wealth of modules and capabilities. VAI continues to deliver innovative solutions that integrate business intelligence (BI), analytics, mobility, and cloud technology.

VAI's 2024 Business Growth and Leadership Fall Forum

Recently, we attended VAI's virtual 2024 Business Growth and Leadership Fall Forum. The two-day event focused on addressing current challenges while preparing for the future, emphasizing how VAI's ERP solutions could help improve leadership and organizational success. The Forum also showcased compelling customer success stories and new technologies aimed at helping customers plan their growth initiatives to ensure business continuity, expansion, and prosperity.

Joe Scioscia, executive vice president at VAI, kicked off the event with a general session that outlined VAI's strategies for current and future growth. He highlighted the latest features and functionalities available in the vendor's ERP software suite. During the afternoon sessions, VAI's software experts presented application overviews of some of the new solutions. These sessions presented in half-hour segments, covered topics such as analytics, mobile computing, financial management, warehouse management, route management, supply and demand planning, and application programming interface (API) integration.

Attendees also heard real-world experiences shared by VAI customers who are using technology to captivate and inspire

change within their businesses. On Day Two, afternoon sessions featured presentations from VAI's technical experts on topics like cloud computing, equipment and infrastructure, security and ransomware, and business continuity planning. Additionally, some VAI partners also highlighted third-party solutions designed to extend and enhance the VAI ERP Suite.

Enter VAI Cloud and S2K Analytics

VAI's sister company, VAI Cloud, LLC, offers a virtual private single-tenant cloud solution for existing S2K ERP customers, using VAI's own infrastructure across two colocation data centers. In 2009, VAI developed the data center infrastructure in collaboration with IBM to offer supreme cybersecurity, ransomware resistance, and enhanced performance with high availability and disaster recovery capabilities for any VAI ERP software user looking to migrate to the cloud.

S2K Enterprise is VAI's ERP solution that streamlines business processes for mid-market manufacturing, distribution, and retail companies Learn more about S2K Enterprise

The system ensures full synchronization between the redundant setups, with data vaulting and regular failover testing. Customers using VAI Cloud can scale resources as needed, with updates done without the need for downtime. This setup allows VAI Cloud to free up critical information technology (IT) resources to focus on strategic initiatives and innovation, rather than manage hardware and infrastructure.

S2K Analytics is built on IBM Cognos, featuring VAI's preconfigured dashboards and reports, embedded directly within S2K ERP. Recent enhancements include the following: Sales Analysis Summary, Structured Sales Analysis, Slow-Moving Inventory, Inventory Turns, Demand Planning vs. Actuals, New Customer Fill Rates, and Improved Health Check.

Regarding artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, VAI is currently exploring IBM's watsonx™ BI Assistant, designed to automatically summarize key insights from preauthored Cognos Analytics content, helping consumers gain deeper insights. The business intelligence (BI) assistant can answer business questions within seconds, guiding users toward the most impactful decisions. Additionally, IBM watsonx™ Assistant™ enables non-IT users to build and deploy AI-powered virtual agents without writing a line of code.

VAI's S2K Smart Center is a role-based, customizable, user environment that serves as dynamic portal-based application, pulling data directly from S2K ERP. This allows users to view all relevant information on a single page, eliminating the need of having to search for data elsewhere.

The upcoming S2K Smart Center Release 6.3 will feature the following capabilities:
- Enhanced key performance indicators (KPIs) with drill-down capabilities,

- New Consolidated Menu Format,
- New "Save View" for Grids,
- New Customer Inquiry,
- New Item Inquiry,
- New Order Inquiry, and
- Improved customer relationship management (CRM) capabilities.

Front-Office Capabilities

When it comes to CRM, aligning Sales and Marketing is crucial for any business looking to grow. A CRM system helps break down silos between Sales and Marketing by providing a unified platform for data, communication, and collaboration. VAI's CRM (Sales) and Marketing tools foster a data-driven approach, enabling both teams to work together to nurture, prioritize, and increase sales to both new and existing customers.

Leveraging VAI Marketing Cloud, companies can create targeted email campaigns based on specific buying behavior and automate email responses based on customer actions or online purchases. VAI Marketing Cloud and is a combination VAI CRM and ActiveCampaign. The benefit of using VAI Marketing Cloud and VAI Sales Force (VAI CRM) is the tight integration with the back end of the S2K ERP system.

VAI Sales Force/VAI CRM solution provides features such as comprehensive contact management, notes, to-do lists, calendar functionality, opportunities, case tracking, and integration with both Outlook and

ERP systems. Sales employees can readily access information about customers, items, vendors, and orders as well as view the sales analysis data.

The latest S2K eBusiness module has been redesigned using Liferay DXP (digital experience platform). While the previous HCL Commerce technology will continue to be supported for the existing customers, the new ecommerce module will include enhanced content management, AI-powered content creation, and digital asset management (DAM) features. S2K eBusiness will be configured with low-code tools and feature enhanced customer self-service options.

Mobility and Warehouse Management

VAI has long had a slew of VAI mobile applications designed to extend the business operations of any enterprise beyond the four walls. The Order Processing app enables both sales reps and customers to build stronger customer relationships. This touch-friendly app works even when disconnected from the ERP system, allowing users to check pricing and product availability, and open accounts receivable (A/R), sales history, payments, and much more. The App can also be branded and made available on both Google Play and Apple App Store.

The Proof of Delivery App streamlines the delivery of merchandise process by replacing traditional signature capture with a clean efficient paperless approach. It allows users to take photographs (useful for any disputes) and automatically process payments

as well as returns for missed or rejected products. Other notable mobile apps are the Route Sales App for handling sales via either trucks or remote warehouses and the Field Service App for processing service and repair orders.

Companies can also automate their warehouses with VAI's Mobile WMS (Warehouse Management System). Specifically, the system enables real-time warehouse operations using Wi-Fi, aiming to optimize warehouse processes and support small stockroom management. The solution is designed to simplify transaction processing in a warehouse, making the task faster and more user friendly. It allows companies to upgrade large bulky RF technology to modern mobile devices by Zebra, featuring enhanced touch-screen displays. This clear and intuitive format reduces training time and speeds up operations.

For S2K Enterprise, the S2K Mobile WMS App is Android based, but the i/OS Application can also be available. The solution runs natively on the device. But for S2K Food, a new S2K Avanti Velocity WMS App with a graphical user interface (GUI) will be launched soon, specifically designed for food companies. However, additional Velocity WMS software licenses will be required for this version.

VAI's Perseverance

VAI faces fierce competition from major ERP players like Oracle NetSuite, Acumatica, Microsoft Dynamics, Infor, and Epicor. Despite this, VAI execs cite point to several reasons why companies choose S2K over other systems on the market:

- **Direct Support from the Authors of the Software**—Unlike the case of most ERP systems that are implemented through a value-added reseller (VAR) network, VAI customers work directly with VAI, and have access to the developers of the software—not a third party that is getting access to the software from the author vendor. This direct connection allows for greater flexibility and support for VAI customers, ensuring that the VAI ERP system is optimized to create maximal efficiency for each business.

- **Industry Knowledge & Expertise**—S2K ERP is specifically designed from the ground up for wholesale distributors and manufacturers. VAI's team has extensive knowledge of these areas, particularly in niche industries like food and pharmaceutical distribution. This industry-specific focus enables VAI to address the challenges faced by these companies more effectively than many of its competitors.

- **Commitment to Customers**—While SaaS-based ERP systems often several advantages, they often present challenges when new releases require modifications that can be costly and disruptive for the customer. VAI recognizes that not every update release will be relevant to

all customers, and allows them the flexibility to upgrade when it makes sense for their business. This approach ensures VAI provides continued support to its customer base, even if customers choose not to adopt the latest release of S2K.

VAI offers additional benefits to its customers, such as providing access to the source code of the software and unlimited user license options. Taken together, these benefits, along with the features and capabilities discussed in this post, position the vendor well against its larger, well-known competitors. We will continue to closely monitor VAI's upcoming enhancements and market standing.