

Westford's FolderWave makes the grade with cloud computing



By Dan O'Brien, dobrien@lowellsun.com
Updated: 01/22/2012 06:58:55 AM EST

WESTFORD -- It's hard to believe that at one time, large universities like Northeastern, Carnegie-Mellon and Boston College used to store and process thousands of paper admissions applications.

And even today, when most students apply online, many of the supporting documents, including transcripts and letters of recommendation, continue to be sent in via paper, and schools need a way to integrate all those documents for review by admissions counselors.

The need to consolidate all of this information -- not to mention other large-volume tasks like financial-aid forms and campus-housing assignments -- has created demand for so-called "document imaging," as well as for relevant software to make it all mesh in each university's own system.

One player in this increasingly promising business area is a Westford operation emerging from stealth mode called FolderWave. The 11-year-old company, headquartered at 238 Littleton Road, makes so-called "cloud-based" software that manages key elements of the enrollment process including applications, admissions, financial aid and housing and health services.

"It's a lot easier than stuffing 35,000 applications in a paper folder," said Bob Burke, a former Wang Labs executive who is co-founder and president of FolderWave.

Burke said the company formed after a friend of co-founder and CEO Bruce Ryan, the late Boston College Executive Vice President Frank Campanella, noticed Burke and Ryan doing a similar application for electronic medical records -- another area where

information from several different directions needed to be organized digitally, all while maintaining privacy.

"The case-management was similar. To be simplistic, he asked us if we could apply it to financial aid (for universities)," Burke said.

Burke said the company has landed six university customers and beams at the suggestion that more are coming. While FolderWave doesn't disclose revenues, Burke said it's growing at about 25 percent to 30 percent per year. "We see a big growth opportunity here," he said. FolderWave has 12 employees.

Andrew Dailey, managing director at MGI Resources in San Francisco, said FolderWave is unique, even in relation to other software solutions, in at least two respects: It has a deep understanding of how higher-education institutions work and it offers a "total solution" to the admissions process.

"Admissions have to be done in a finite period of time and have very specific requirements: You have to get that class accepted, admitted and enrolled in a certain period of time," Dailey said. "What's unique in their solution is that the university can work with them on everything, from letters sent to their P.O. box to digital data. FolderWave configures the system to fit the customer's needs, so that they don't have to change their own (admissions) processes."

The analyst said a "dirty little secret" of the college applications process is the number of extra temporary workers that must be hired to help sort applications.

"By allowing schools to leverage all their information, they save boatloads of money," Dailey said, adding that FolderWave's programs are also designed to allow only the users who need the information to access it.



Bob Burke, president of Westford-based FolderWave, said it took time to convince customers that the company's use of "cloud-based" software was a more-efficient way to manage information related to college admissions. SUN / BOB WHITAKER

Despite just a handful of customers, Burke noted that one of them -- the National Association of Independent Schools -- is an umbrella organization for 2,000 schools in grades K-12. "That's a big one, so it took a bunch of our time to ramp it up," he said. "We made a large commitment to our early adopters to make sure everything was hunky-dory."

Also, he said it was only recently that the concept of "cloud-based services" -- where the vendor takes the information and manages it off-site -- caught on with potential customers. "It created a longer sales cycle," Burke said. "Now the marketplace has transitioned to appreciate it."

The cost to install a FolderWave system varies, but Burke said that in all cases, clients have found that it pays for itself inside of 18 months. "In some cases, a large temporary staff can be gone in a matter of days," he said. Burke said there were several other software companies that offer solutions for universities, but "nobody does it like we do."

Dailey agreed. "There are plenty of (other) on-premise solutions, but those are cases where the university might have to change its software (to fit the vendor's software)," he said, adding that FolderWave can configure systems that manage all relevant information in such a way that's amenable to the customer's existing admissions process.

"They ask, 'How do we build something to fit the process?'" Dailey said. "The college can then go about the process as it did before."

Burke said FolderWave is completely bootstrapped; that is, there is no venture funding. "We like developing our business on our own schedule; we have fun here," Burke said. "We think there's a big opportunity ahead."

Dailey went as far as to call FolderWave "the iPhone of their industry." "They've brought together a lot of pieces and built a better mousetrap, using them all," he said.

About The President

Bob Burke is president of FolderWave, Inc.

(www.folderwave.com), a cloud-based company offering products and services designed to significantly improve complex, high-volume time-dependent process and data management operations in many operational areas in higher education. Bob can be reached at bob@folderwave.com.

