

# "Let's practice what we preach"

## Award-winning Microsoft partner leads the charge to the cloud

When John Pence founded Sunrise Technologies in 1994, he had a clear vision and purpose for the organization – helping brands solve complex business challenges through the best technology available. Through his work as the CIO for Champion Products, a division of Sara Lee Corporation (now a part of HanesBrands), he understood that many of the biggest difficulties companies face were rooted in their supply chains. So, at first, Sunrise solely operated as a solution-agnostic supply chain technology consulting firm.

Today, Sunrise sells, implements, and supports Microsoft Dynamics 365. Sunrise also develops exclusive supply chain IP for Dynamics 365. While Sunrise's operations and technical expertise may have changed from its early days, the core mission to provide businesses with the best technology and service available has not.

This focus on customer service, along with other pressing business needs, was one of the primary drivers behind Sunrise's decision to move all of its operations to the cloud.

### FAST FACTS

**Name:** Sunrise Technologies

**Year Founded:** 1994

**Website:** sunrise.co

**Headquarters:** Winston-Salem, North Carolina

**Additional Locations:** Lugano, Switzerland; Xi'an, China



# GOALS AND BENEFITS

## Leading the Way

Sunrise executives acknowledge that when the organization began its move to the cloud in 2013, they were luckier than some companies making the same transition. "There wasn't any critical failure or catastrophe that made us decide it was the right time to move," said Sunrise Chief Technology Officer, Mike Cottingham. **"We saw that with Microsoft Azure, the cloud was the future. We knew we needed to understand it before we could implement it. Once we got further into the project, we realized continuing was a no brainer."**

Pence also saw the project as an extension of the company ethos to do the right thing for its clients, no matter what. "I strongly felt that if we're advocating to our customers that they can thrive in an Azure based world, then we need to prove that we can operate that way too," said Pence, "we needed to eat our own dog food."

The first things to move to the cloud were Sunrise's Dynamics CRM instance and demo data, followed by Office 365. Over the course of the entire project, Sunrise moved its financials from Dynamics AX 2012 to Dynamics 365.



Worldwide Microsoft Azure adoption grew from 20% to 34% in 2017. It was also the only private cloud company to show significant growth.



"We felt like it was essential to practice what we preach and implement what we do for our customers every day!"

Heather Essic  
Chief Administrative Officer | Sunrise Technologies

## Finding Security in the Cloud

Like many other organizations with on premise systems, data security was a top of mind concern for Sunrise prior to moving to the cloud. "In particular, I was very eager to implement Office 365," said Pence. "We are in the IP business. We're constantly creating large numbers of documents that contain the intellectual assets of our business. Before migrating to O365, every single employee's laptop was a point of vulnerability. Now, with O365 and Azure, we have a secure, backed-up environment where the intellectual property of our enterprise is always protected."

Prior to the move, data backups and disaster recovery were highly manual processes that involved a Sunrise employee taking home physical tapes every evening in case of a problem. In the event of a critical failure, it could have meant someone flying a backup tape across the country.

As Sunrise continued to grow, this process became less and less feasible. According to Pence, "We were reaching a point as a company where we needed to become more sophisticated with our internal platforms, but that wasn't going to be realistic for our staff. We needed disaster recovery, we needed better security, but it didn't make sense to hire a full IT staff to handle just that portion of the business." Cottingham agreed, "**It just didn't make sense to devote more of our IT spend to internal processes and security when we had a clear alternative in the Microsoft Azure platform.**"

While other organizations sometimes struggle with the loss of control when moving data to the cloud, this was not a major source of concern for Sunrise. "I realize that for some companies, even some of our prospects and clients, moving to the cloud is a really nerve-wracking decision," said Pence. "But I think if people knew what it took to stay safe and secure they'd think, 'How can I do this myself?' Threats are evolving more quickly than ever before, as is the skill set needed to keep up with those threats. Maintaining those skills and providing a safe environment is incredibly expensive. Even the ability to keep up with the infrastructure! If you're not on the latest and greatest, you're not as secure as you could be."

Cottingham agreed that while there was a tradeoff in control, the benefits outweigh any sense of concern. "There was definitely a feeling that we didn't control our own destiny any more. **We didn't know if it would ultimately be cost-effective or stable, but it has turned out to be both!** If something happens in our primary database in the east, the west database would just pick it up and we wouldn't even notice. We could have never achieved this level of high availability on our own."

He isn't the only one enjoying the peace of mind that comes with moving to the cloud. Chief Administrative Officer, Heather Essic, also agreed that it is a vast improvement, "From a company perspective, we feel safe having our data in the cloud and that we no longer have to make our own backups. **As a company, we can focus on more important things.**"



"Frankly, Microsoft has more people that know about security than we ever would – if someone or something could break Microsoft, then what chance did we have?"

Mike Cottingham  
Chief Technology Officer | Sunrise Technologies



## Improved Operations

Perhaps one of the most immediately noticeable changes to Sunrise came from the improvement in everyday operations. For example, moving to a cloud-based expense reporting service ended up decreasing the time spent expensing by 96%! Sunrise's internal IT department also benefitted greatly from the move to the cloud, with time devoted to machine maintenance down to almost nothing. Even moving the business' landlines to Skype for Business has resulted in less work for the IT team.

Another area of significant time savings is the decrease in effort in maintaining all the systems and devices that make the company run. According to Pence, "Previously, updating anything – SharePoint, Office, SQL Server, or Exchange – would just take an extraordinary amount of time and was really painful. We've gotten all that time back by moving to the cloud."

**The move has also offered Sunrise a level of flexibility that was previously very difficult, if not impossible to achieve.** "Everything is faster, and we have so many more options," said Cottingham, "Faster database set up, faster copying, setting up a new email user is faster. I can spin up a server in no time. I just say I want a server with X and Y on it, they [Microsoft] spin it up, and I can get rid of it just as fast. Before, I had to go buy a machine, or find space on an existing server and worry about messing up what was on there."

The finance team also saw significant benefits in moving to the cloud, which they first undertook by moving from QuickBooks to Dynamics AX 2012 running in Azure. "We ran QuickBooks successfully for twenty years, but it was clear we had outgrown it when Sunrise became international," said Heather Essic, Sunrise's Chief Administrative Officer. By switching to Dynamics AX 2012, Essic and her team were able to run two sets of financial records in two currencies and still be able to consolidate them into one set of financial statements in a single currency.

While there were certainly benefits to moving away from QuickBooks, it came with a steep learning curve, since QuickBooks and Dynamics AX operate on very different data structures. Luckily, when the team decided it was time to upgrade to Dynamics 365, the experience was much different. Essic reported, "Migration from Dynamics AX 2012 to Dynamics 365 was very smooth – we didn't have any trouble with our data coming over. Actually, we went live in the middle of the month, which I can't imagine doing on any other solution."

One thing Essic noted as a plus right away was the ability to access Dynamics 365 from any device on any browser, without the need for a remote desktop or a separate piece of software. **The team also saw the Dynamics 365 upgrade as a launch pad for additional initiatives over the next few years, which had ranged from impractical to impossible prior to the move.**

### See it in Action: Sunrise 365™ Quick Start in the Cloud

Sunrise's exclusive project management methodology originally began as a physical code extension for Dynamics AX. However, as the Azure cloud matured, it became clear to Cottingham and his team, that the cloud was the real home for this essential tool.

Recently, the Sunrise IT team released Sunrise's first PowerApp, mySunrise365 Tasks, an internal tool for consultants to easily check and update project details on-the-go, tied directly to Quick Start. Sunrise Technical Architect, Jeremy Brown, was responsible for building the app, and said that PowerApp was selected because of the choices it was by far, "The quickest way to build it. We had key functionality in place within 2-3 days while any other tool would have taken at least a month." Brown and Cottingham see this as just the first in a series of interconnected applications designed to improve Sunrise's offerings and services.



Welcome, Jeremy Brown!

My Owned Tasks

My Assigned Subtasks

My Assigned Issues

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# CONCLUSION

While the benefits to customer service and improvements to security and overall operations were quickly apparent to the Sunrise team, the migration wasn't without a few hiccups. According to Pence, "When we made the decision to move to the cloud, there were still some aspects of Azure that were a little immature. However, those aspects rapidly improved over the course of the migration so that by the time we were finally live, those concerns were gone."

Even with those few bumps, the team agreed that there was never any question of staying on premise or regrets about moving to the cloud. **"This project was not without effort but it's definitely a business decision I'm happy we made,"** said Pence.

Cottingham was equally optimistic about the future of Sunrise on the Intelligent cloud, citing upcoming improvements to the Azure platform as well as updates to key functionality in other Microsoft products like Power BI, Flow, and Logic Apps. In fact, Flow was singled out particularly as replacing more clunky FTP-based workflows for a more streamlined experience.

The Sunrise team has already begun applying what they learned from this project to customer implementations, and the executive team agreed that the internal move was key to providing great service to Sunrise's clients. "For some of our customers, this was their first time moving into the cloud." said Cottingham. "Could we have helped them move if we hadn't done it ourselves? Probably. But **if we're advocating that this is the way of the future – then we should be leading the way.**"



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OUR CLIENTS'  
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SUNRISE AND  
MICROSOFT

John Pence, knew that Microsoft was on the verge of something big in 2003. With the introduction of Axapta (as Dynamics 365 was known back then) Microsoft changed the business application landscape forever. It was at that point Sunrise decided to go all in with Microsoft, and we've never looked back.