

EMAIL INTERVIEW - Steve Jones & Ken Sinclair

Steve Jones, Managing Partner of The S4 Group, Inc.

Steve. Jones is Managing Partner of The S4 Group, Inc. in Ogden, UT. He is an entrepreneur focused on providing open systems interfaces for legacy building management systems. Mr. Jones has more than 30 years experience in the networking, telecommunications, systems integration, and building automation industries. Prior to forming The S4 Group he was a senior member of Johnson Controls System Products Engineering organization providing enterprise solutions and integrating the Metasys® Building Automation System into Johnson Controls most complex customers' IT environments, enterprise network infrastructure, and SNMP management platforms.

Bringing Open Systems to Legacy BAS

Environments

Sinclair: Where did the company name originate?

Jones: When we formed the company we explored many name possibilities and came upon "Software Services and System Solutions for the Enterprise" as a working name as the organization was in its formative stages. However, someone much younger and apparently much smarter advised me "Dad, no one will ever use that name, it's too long. Why don't you just call it The S4 Group?" And so we did. The longer name has become the concept line on our business cards and published materials. I believe it reflects the essence of what we do without getting mired down in technology details.

Sinclair: How did you determine your corporate direction?

Jones: For the first 15 months of our existence we focused almost entirely on providing systems consulting services to Johnson Controls field offices and corporate organizations. As a result of these activities we saw a common set of customer needs that would extend and enhance the capabilities of the Metasys® system. We rolled these requirements and concepts into our business plan and used them to drive the functional specifications for the N2 Router, a line of products that customers, and their integration partners, can use to address issues surrounding legacy systems migration, scalability, and IT integration in enterprise scale, complex Johnson Controls Metasys® environments. By finding a way to productize our expertise in the form of the N2 Router we can serve many customers simultaneously.

Sinclair: Why would a customer want to upgrade their legacy BAS system instead of doing a wholesale replacement with new technology?

Jones: Companies have made huge investments in their building infrastructure and automation systems. In many cases the unitary controllers and application specific controllers aren't broken so why force a customer to buy a complete new building automation environment? What is needed is to address a couple of very specific areas: 1) a facelift on the user interface and the addition of web interfaces, 2) enhanced analysis,

trending, and reporting capabilities, 3) the introduction of truly open interfaces to facilitate the introduction of new technology and increase competition, and 4) much better integration with and utilization of the existing IT infrastructure and systems.

Sinclair: Isn't oBIX going to facilitate a lot of that?

Jones: Absolutely, but you'll see oBIX implementations appearing in new system offerings first. We are focusing on the huge installed base of legacy systems and bringing open solutions to those environments using existing standards for open systems. As the oBIX XML-based interface standards mature you'll see us adding support for this interface in addition to the OPC, BACnet, SQL, and SNMP support that we initially provide.

Sinclair: Isn't this a lot for a small company to take on?

Jones: Yes, and we knew we would never get a product out the door if we tried to solve all the integration and scalability issues for everyone and provide for their application needs. Instead, we focused on a much more strategic goal and defined our N2 Router product family as middleware. We implemented it as an appliance that you transparently insert into an existing Johnson Controls Metasys[®] network. This allows the customer to retain their existing investments, and add value to the solution. We make the data previously locked inside the Metasys[®] system available to other BAS and IT systems via open interfaces. There are many OPC and BACnet based application and system choices on the market today within each category I mentioned above. The customer, or their integration partner, is now able to implement a best of breed solution in each area that perfectly matches their business requirements. We also saw building relationships and partnerships as a function critical to our success. We've had a strategic partnership with Obermeier Software almost from day one. They are our development partners for the N2 Router. We developed a relationship with Matrikon through which they offer the SNMP OPC Server and OPC SNMP Enterprise Agent to their customers. And, we are developing channel and OEM relationships for the N2 Router.

Sinclair: Why did you choose to work at the field bus level instead of at a higher systems level?

Jones: First of all, the N2 field bus protocol is much simpler to work with than the Metasys[®] N1 system level protocol. Secondly, the Johnson Controls Metasys[®] Compatibility Program, which we joined soon after forming the company, focuses on solutions at the N2 bus level. Working at this level we could build higher reliability into our products and we could achieve the transparency to existing installed systems that was a major design goal for the N2 Router. It also allows us to address additional IT integration and scalability challenges that a lot of our customers have asked for. For instance, we can transport the N2 bus over the customers existing IT network or merge multiple N2 networks into one as part of a legacy system upgrade strategy.

Sinclair: What's next?

Jones: First priority is to release the N2 Router. When we went to our first customer test site with the OPC N2 Router we found that we needed to add some features before product release that we had set aside as future enhancements. The integrator at the customer site was adamant enough about the importance of these features being in the initial product release that we took the time to add them now. I think we have a much stronger product because we listened to what this critical first customer was saying. We have committed to product demonstrations at the NFM&T & MS Expo 2005 in Baltimore, MD March 15 - 17th and are a Silver Sponsor of the Iconics Customer Summit March 21st - 23rd in Orlando, FL. We're listening to our customers and that will drive our longer term directions. We will be adding scripting capability to the N2 Router evolving it into a full blown controller offering. Along the way we will be adding support for new legacy BAS protocols and upstream interfaces. We are evaluating the business case for developing parallel product lines providing open interfaces to systems to and from other legacy BAS products.

Sinclair: Where can I get more information?

Jones: Visit our web site at www.thes4group.com. A demo version of the N2 Router will be available there soon after the product is released.