

ASCnet Reports Progress On 'Real-Time'

Agency user group's outgoing chair also cites expansion of educational opportunities

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In a year when most are satisfied with holding their own in a sinking economy, the Applied Systems Client Network reported growth in a number of key areas thanks to the resilience of its volunteer members, the user group's outgoing chair says.

The commitment of ASCnet volunteers helped drive significant improvements in usage and training over the past year, Mike Montgomery, senior associate development consultant for Lockton Companies LLC, said in his keynote address during the group's annual meeting.

The Applied Systems users group—representing more than 80,000 insurance professionals in 11 countries—reported gains including more than 18.7 million real-time transactions, increased educational opportunities and improved relationships with carrier partners.

ASCnet also unveiled a new program—the “Real Time 21 Day Challenge”—designed to help agencies improve workflow and fully utilize their management systems.

Mr. Montgomery said the proliferation of committee activity during his tenure demonstrated the commitment of ASCnet volunteers. For example, the education committee developed more than 50 new course offerings for this month's annual meeting—called TENCon—as well as webinars and other learning experiences for members throughout the year.

He noted that it's a “buyers market” for learning opportunities, urging agencies to take advantage of this so they are well-positioned for growth when economic conditions improve.

ASCnet's interim chief executive officer, Rick Morgan, praised members for their involvement and urged them to continue working with Applied and carriers to improve workflows.

“This system has survived other tough times,” Mr. Morgan said. “The fact that you're here means you're doing better than your competitors because of your involvement in ASCnet. You're opinion leaders and advocates for change.”

Mr. Morgan, long recognized in the insurance industry as an expert on technology and automation, credited ASCnet's “three-legged stool” membership of agents, carriers and Applied Systems for the gains made during the past year.

Mark Layden, chief operating officer of Applied Systems, recapped the vendor's activities over the past year and assured attendees of the company's fiscal stability.

Instead of layoffs, he said Applied Systems has reallocated many of its employees to development and customer service roles, scaled back on company social events, and downsized its mobile demonstration unit.

In an ongoing effort to listen to users, the company introduced a “Let's Talk” marketing campaign to solicit product feedback and assigned a full-time staff to address the “tens of thousands” of customer-generated PMRs (product modification requests) to troubleshoot problems.

Applied has also re-dedicated itself to “quality over quantity” by scaling back new

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features and stabilizing its current products, especially its TAM Series 9 and 10 products, Mr. Layden said.

The company invested in improving the transition process for users upgrading to its top-shelf Epic system, introduced last year. Epic made news in 2009 when Willis Holdings announced plans to use the system, but Mr. Layden stressed that Epic isn't only for big brokers.

"More than 20 agencies are starting to use Epic, each with 10 or fewer employees," he noted, pointing out that Epic 3.0 is now in general release, with 4.0 in beta testing. Future releases will feature improved accounting and reporting functions, including advanced graphics presentations and drill-down reports, he said.

Applied Systems is also supporting ASCnet's new "Real Time 21-Day Challenge," based on the premise that it takes 21 days to form a new habit.

The program will help Applied Systems users of all levels use "real time" technology to adopt new workflows by making incremental changes to how the staff does business, Mr. Layden said.

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