

# Aramark's Boffa: Remotely hosted POS gets an A for campus jobs

By ALAN J. LIDDLE

**(Aug. 10, 2009)** *The appropriateness of remotely hosting point-of-sale system software for multiple locations and relying on centralized storage for restaurant-level-transaction data has been a point of contention within the industry for years.*



**Dominic L. Boffa is the chief information officer and vice president of technology solutions for Aramark Higher Education, the college foodservice arm of Aramark Corp.**

*Proponents, many citing theory as opposed to actual experience, say that such hosted POS systems connected to stores via wide-area networks can speed up deployment, reduce time and money spent on maintenance, simplify data standardization, and foster faster reporting.*

*The doubters, some of whom have softened their stance a bit in recent years as wide-area network speed, reliability and availability have improved, contend that the mission-critical role of POS makes it too important to tie to remote software and hardware.*

*Among foodservice organizations that would rather test the waters than talk on this topic is Aramark Higher Education, the college-foodservice arm of Philadelphia-based Aramark Corp. that serves about 400 campuses in North America. AHE has worked with the Symphony hosted-POS technology of Micros Systems Inc. since early 2008 under the guidance of chief information officer and vice president of technology solutions Dominic L. Boffa, who joined Aramark a decade ago after working in consulting, management and other posts for such firms as KPMG Consulting, General Electric Co. and Lockheed Martin.*

*Hard Rock Cafe of Orlando, Fla., which uses Symphony at all 67 company-operated restaurants, is another of what is believed to be a relatively small number of multiunit organizations that work with hosted POS. Among other software packages that support central hosting are SquirrelOne from Squirrel Systems, which is configured in that manner by Mountain Park Lodges in Canada's Jasper National Park; and Halo from Vivonet Inc., with a user roster that features stores franchised by Kernels Popcorn Ltd.*

*Nation's Restaurant News recently spoke with Aramark's Boffa about his group's experience with centrally hosted POS.*

## **Why is your company using hosted POS?**

Simphony provides us with increased information to manage our business, improves data standardization, gives us increased security as required by payment card industry rules, and it decreases the effort to deploy and train. Most importantly, it gives time back to our store operators to focus on consumers, brand quality and operations analysis.

## **Where are you using this technology?**

We now have Simphony installed at 23 of our university clients, representing 69 individual "stores" [or service points] and 96 individual registers, self-service kiosks and kitchen display system units. By the end of September we will have 13 more stores and 36 more devices installed on Simphony. The cool thing is that these 82 stores are not homogeneous, as they represent multiple national and proprietary brands in our portfolio, [including] Starbucks, Einstein Bros. Bagels, Tim Hortons, Papa John's, Freshens and, coming on line in August, Chick-fil-A.

## **What types of payments can your system process?**

Cash, credit, debit and stored value.

## **What can you say about your company's experience with hosted POS to date?**

Simphony is providing the expected benefits, especially as we get more comfortable installing it, and as the product itself

matures. It is giving us the foundation to collect and report information vital to the store location as well as to the enterprise.

**Describe the data network over which your hosted POS system runs.**

Because we are “guests” inside our [client] universities and their IT infrastructure, we utilize whatever local-area network and wide-area network services are available to our store locations with the caveat that we comply with our host’s policy and practices regarding Internet security firewall settings, etc. Because Symphony and its reporting modules are Web-and Web-services-based, information is pretty much available anytime and anywhere over a variety of connections.

**Where is your POS system hosted?**

At a SAS-70/Payment Card Industry [group]-certified secure hosting facility in the United States.

**How does remote software hosting and central data storage impact your IT operations?**

It greatly reduces support and maintenance required at the store level [because] installation is basically a plug-in-and-go [affair]. But having multiple clients run off of one system increases the importance of maintaining a high availability model and other configuration management and service-management disciplines. System updates have a much broader impact, and must undergo thorough integration and regression testing. We also utilize a very disciplined software release methodology that includes an Operational Readiness Review process.

**In your locations relying on hosted software, you are using so-called “thin” POS terminals with fewer moving parts, such as hard drives and fans, than conventional PC-based devices. How is that working out?**

Our experience so far with [Microsoft] CE-Thin client devices indicate that they cost slightly less, but offer much higher reliability, and have reduced maintenance and environmental requirements.

**How do you deal with wide-area network failures, if any?**

The Micros Symphony product has robust capabilities for doing “off-line” transactions at the register during network outages. In addition, we have taken steps to ensure redundancy, high availability and load balancing with our hosting provider. Unfortunately, credit and debit card processing may get interrupted if the outage causes a disconnect from our credit card processors. This is no different than a credit card swipe device losing a phone line connection today.

**FAST FACTS**

**EDUCATION:** master of science in industrial administration, Union College, Schenectady, N.Y.; bachelor of science in system engineering, Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, N.Y.  
**HOMETOWN:** Staten Island, N.Y.  
**AGE:** 56

**Has your company had enough experience with centralized POS to reach a conclusion about its total cost of ownership, or TCO, versus conventional POS systems?**

I would say that the TCO is lower than individual store installations based on our specific situation [involving] broad geography [considerations], with U.S. and Canadian operations; a broad portfolio of brands; a need to aggregate and view data quickly without bothering property operators; and a need to quickly react [to market conditions], and formulate effective market pricing and menu engineering [strategies]. But this [conclusion] is preliminary, given our small base of installations.

**Any other beneficial experiences related to this deployment?**

The project also gave us an opportunity to revisit and standardize our POS processes, menu-item naming conventions, and product categories and classes, which will yield additional savings down the road.

**Will your company further deploy hosted-POS technology?**

Aramark Higher Education is in a rollout mode with Symphony and will be widely deploying it over the next few years.—  
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