NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION SCORES A WIN WITH SMART DATA PLAYS

The National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) constantly looks for ways to better serve its members—current and former NFL players—during and after their football careers. With a new player management system built on Microsoft Dynamics 365 and Microsoft Azure, the NFLPA can quickly mine player data to find licensing and marketing opportunities for more players. By using these cloud platforms, the NFLPA can quickly scale its systems and reduce capital and maintenance costs, freeing staff to develop new member services.

Tim Worley had always dreamed of being a successful professional athlete and businessman. After lots of hard work in high school and college, his dream came true, and he was drafted as the seventh overall pick by the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1989. Worley was the first Steeler rookie in the team's history to get a million-dollar signing bonus.

However, Worley immediately felt the pressure behind that honor. "The fear hit me, because I knew that these guys were expecting a lot of me, an immediate return on investment," he says. By his third year in the National Football League (NFL), Worley was coping with the stress by partying, drinking, and using drugs, which cut his NFL career short. He played five seasons with the Steelers and two seasons with the Chicago Bears. "Out of a promising career, I got six years when it could've been 10 or 12," he says. Overnight, the cheering stopped; his dream was gone.

Worley's life went into a tailspin—more substance abuse, depression. He needed help but had no idea how or who to ask. After several years working as a professional speaker, Worley called on The Trust to help him take his career to the next level. The Trust is an arm of the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) that provides assistance to NFL players as they transition out of football.

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National Football League Players Association

The Trust helped Worley fund two professional speaker and leadership development consultant certifications. With his wife Dee, Worley founded his own communications consulting firm, Worley Global Enterprises. He is now a sought-after speaker, leadership development consultant, and life skills coach, working with corporate executives, amateur athletes, professional athletes, and ministry leaders.

"Being these warriors that we are, sometimes we're prideful and don't want to ask for help," Worley says. "But I had to humble myself and ask."
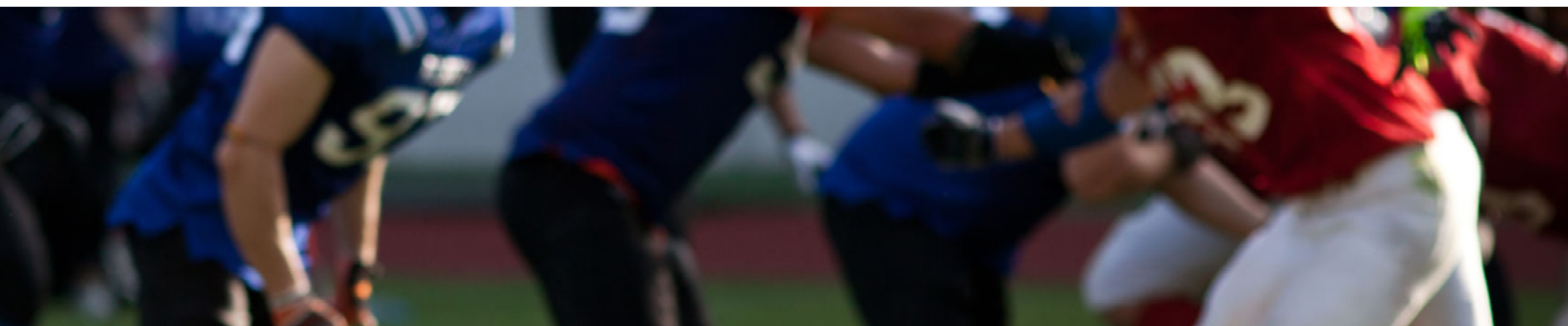
LIFELONG HELP
FOR NFL PLAYERS

The NFLPA has many success stories like Worley's, ranging from helping former NFL players succeed in the non-football world to finding marketing and licensing opportunities for current players.

As the nonprofit union for NFL players, the NFLPA represents them in collective bargaining agreements with the NFL, negotiates retirement and insurance benefits, and broadly represents their interests on and off the field. Through several sister organizations such as The Trust, the NFLPA provides a range of services beyond players' NFL careers:

- NFL Players, Inc. (NFLPI) is the for-profit licensing and marketing arm of the NFLPA. It brokers licensing deals in trading cards, clothing, video games, and myriad other opportunities.
- The Trust (powered by the NFLPA) provides transitioning football players with the support they need to ensure their success off the field and in life.
- The Professional Athletes Foundation (PAF) provides career, health, financial, and educational support for players transitioning out of NFL careers.

Together, these groups provide lifelong assistance to the NFL's nearly 2,200 active players and 3,200 former players.

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But in the daily scrum of communications across these four organizations, opportunities were missed and details overlooked. Each organization maintained its own player management system. Much of their information overlapped, but each organization collected some data that the others weren't privy to.

"Various departments within our different organizations would perform player surveys and capture information like military service, languages spoken, education, charities supported, and hobbies, but none of the other departments or organizations had access to this survey data," says Rich Persons, Director of Information Systems at NFLPA. "If we got a licensing opportunity for a Spanish-speaking player who played golf, lived in California, and had military ties, we would have to spend a week or two emailing and calling around to see if we could find a match. Fulfilling those requests really depended on what and who you knew. We were missing a lot of opportunities for our members."

And it wasn't just about making money for players. The Trust and the PAF maintained data on many of the challenges faced by former NFL players, but what if the NFLPA could use that data to identify current NFL players with similar profiles so that it could provide support before problems arose? Or in a case like Worley's, with the right data, The Trust could have identified other former players struggling with the same issues who could've provided valuable mentoring.

"We're always looking to improve how we communicate with and serve our members, and we knew that we could do a better job of mining the data in our systems to better fulfill our mission," Persons says.

MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMBERS
WITH ONE PLAYER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

NFLPA brought in longtime IT partner Applied Information Sciences (AIS)—a member of the Microsoft Partner Network with multiple Gold-level competencies—to create a single, shared player management system for all the NFLPA organizations. That system, called PA.NET, is based on Microsoft Dynamics 365, which provides cloud-based customer relationship management (CRM) capabilities coupled with specialized modules for sales and other business functions. AIS skillfully customized Dynamics 365 to meet the unique needs of the NFLPA.

While creating PA.NET, AIS moved all the IT systems (websites, financial applications, and others) within all four NFLPA organizations to Microsoft Azure, giving NFLPA an entirely cloud-based business.

With one master set of player data and powerful reporting tools that employees use to find answers to their own questions, the NFLPA can uncover marketing and licensing opportunities for more players and identify other ways to help its members. When that licensing request comes in for a Spanish-speaking golfer in California with military ties, the NFLPA staff can find the right person, or people, in minutes.

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Inside PA.NET, Dynamics 365 talks to Microsoft Office 365, a cloud-based productivity suite used by NFLPA, to help employees deliver even better member service. Dynamics 365 captures emails and documents by player name and stores them in the player's PA.NET record. So, when an NFLPA member calls any of the organizations, the employee can quickly see all the commun ication that the NFLPA has had with the that member and instantly pull up letters, contracts, and other documents to have a personalized, knowledgeable conversation. "I see that you spoke with Danielle last week, and you're having trouble getting your licensing check. Let me resolve that for you."

No more scrambling for answers while the caller waits or bouncing players from employee to employee. "Having all our software programs working together helps us present a much more professional face to our members, which boosts their confidence in us," Persons says.

EMPLOYEES EMPOWERED
TO GROW THE BUSINESS

Because PA.NET automates so many previously manual processes, it frees up hours of drudge work each week for NFLPA employees—time that they convert to creative problem solving for members.

Take trading card deals. The NFLPA receives about 200 trading card signing requests a week, and all the details previously had to be manually entered into the player management system—a job that took four to five days a week. Today, staff simply feed a spreadsheet into PA.NET, which incorporates the data automatically, reducing the task to about four hours a week.

The NFLPA also streamlined its processing of standard representation agreements (SRAs). Previously, player agents completed paper SRA forms and emailed them to the NFLPA, where an employee would scan them and manually enter the data. Today, an agent simply visits the NFLPA website, completes an online form, and uploads it. The NFLPA quickly reviews it, presses a button, and PA.NET automatically ingests the data. A multiweek activity now happens instantaneously.

"Speeding up SRAs has important impacts on players. "Until players are in our system, we can't process licensing and marketing deals for them," says Persons. "But with SRAs filed quickly, we can get to work for them immediately."

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And getting to work for players is what NFLPA employees dearly love to do. "With PA.NET, our employees have time to be more creative in figuring out how to enhance our member services— like managing licensee relationships better and providing better post-NFL career programs," Persons says. "We pride ourselves on being the premier licensing sports group—finding opportunities for players beyond football. PA.NET relieves employees of the busy work that robbed them of their ability to grow the business. Today, our employees feel more ownership and a greater sense of pride in what they do."

PA.NET is also mobile friendly, allowing traveling NFLPA employees to access player data from wherever they are. Say an NFLPA employee is out of town negotiating a player's salary. He needs the name and contact information for the player's agent, but it's after-hours at the home office. Not a problem. He simply taps into PA.NET from his smartphone and grabs the information. "With the mobile accessibility of PA.NET, our staff fulfill their own information needs in seconds without having to worry about data security," Persons says.

"With Dynamics 365 and Azure, we can introduce innovations in days versus months, which is a huge change and point of pride for our staff."

James Rouse: *Senior Database Administrator*
National Football League Players Association

INSTANT SCALABILITY,
LOWER COSTS

By moving its business systems to the cloud, the NFLPA can scale its infrastructure instantly when traffic spikes. Licensing offers heat up the minute the football season ends, and now the NFLPA can instantly scale its website and reporting infrastructure to handle that traffic and increased workload. Previously, it had to over-provision servers for worst-case periods.

"There's another key member-facing benefit of Dynamics 365 and Azure scalability," says Persons. "We pay members royalties based on our PA.NET sales reports, and we can get those payments to members faster with high-performing systems. We're talking payments of thousands of dollars for some members, so quick turnaround is important to them."

The NFLPA no longer has to refresh six-figure server and storage systems every few years. By moving to Microsoft cloud technologies, the organization converted that boat-anchor capital cost for its compute and storage infrastructure to a predictable monthly operating cost.

There are IT labor savings, too. "We're no longer coming in on weekends to replace a blade [server] or writing reports for users," says James Rouse, Senior Database Administrator at the NFLPA. "We've gotten about 30 percent of our time back, which we use to help our business users use technology more creatively to serve members. With Dynamics 365 and Azure, we can introduce innovations in days versus months, which is a huge change and point of pride f or our staff."

Members like Tim Worley feel the impact of these new ideas very personally, when the NFLPA calls them with new opportunities, career and health improvement ideas, and, in general, a roadmap to a better tomorrow.

Find out more about the NFLPA on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

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AIS AT A GLANCE

AIS provides software and systems engineering services to government agencies and businesses across the United States. We specialize in cloud services, DevOps, custom application development and IT services. Our areas of expertise include Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services (AWS), Office 365, SharePoint, Dynamics CRM, software development, User Experience (UX), Data and Analytics, Emerging Technologies (i.e., AI, Blockchain, and IoT), and Managed Services.

Our customers range from start-ups to Fortune 100 companies, and include state and local governments as well as defense and national security agencies. Our analysis-driven approach to solving business problems—combined with our commitment to deadlines and budgets—results in successful projects and long-term relationships with our clients. We're a top-tier cloud partner for Microsoft, Amazon, and Equinix with proven capabilities and a track record of success.

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