FOUNDER STORY

I built manufacturer portals. That's how I know where they end.

How more than 20 years of building digital connections between companies led me to one simple question: why does a plant need a separate portal for every machine?

Gerd Bart · Founder and CEO, Transaction-Network · about 7 minutes to read



Some insights cannot be learned from a book. They only come when you keep asking the same question long enough: in different industries, with different customers, under different kinds of pressure. It took me more than 20 years to fully understand one such insight. Once I had it, I knew I could no longer stay a consultant. I had to build.

The common thread I didn't see for a long time

Looking back today, the common thread was always the same. I just didn't see it clearly for a long time.

In 1998, at 22, I founded my first company. I had no elaborate plan. I had seen that the internet could connect companies in a way that had never been possible before. I built websites, developed intranets and wrote early content management systems for mid-sized businesses: for Sparkasse Stockach, for Flesch Arbeitsbühnen and for dozens of small companies that suddenly wanted to be reachable online. At the back of my mind was always the same question: how do I bring companies together digitally?

Year after year, that question got sharper. At living systems I worked on dooyoo, one of Germany's early digital networks, before the big e-commerce boom. At dmc, one of the country's leading e-commerce agencies, I was responsible for online shops for MediaMarkt, Galeria Kaufhof, HSE24 and Germany's

largest mail-order retailers. There I learned what it means when digital systems carry real business between companies: in real time, reliably, under real pressure every day.

Then came the SAP world. At Sybit, an SAP consultancy, I was responsible for the strategies of its machine-builder clients as Solution Principal Digital Business. Together with Markus Jäckle and Matthias Maier, who today lead product and technology at Transaction-Network, I spent seven years there developing customer portals for leading machine builders, including myBühler, MyMULTIVAC and KHS Connect. They were good portals. Customers liked them.

I know ERP systems, SAP rollouts and field service software from a hundred projects. I have seen what they can do and where they stop. They always stop at the same place: the company boundary.

> *SAP organizes the company, MES organizes production, field service software organizes the technician. Service on the machine happens between companies. That is exactly where each of these systems stops.*

Every portal ends at its own manufacturer

With every portal, the same moment came sooner or later. The operator we had built it for does not have machines from just one manufacturer. They run a machine park that has grown over years, with machines from many manufacturers. For each one, they are supposed to log into a separate portal, learn its logic and keep track of its contacts. With nine manufacturers, that means nine logins, nine shops and nine ways to the right part. So they pick up the phone.

We kept rebuilding the portals, every project from scratch, the same building blocks adapted for the next customer. Each time, the result was one more island. The more manufacturers build their own portal, the bigger the operator's problem gets. More systems don't solve an island problem. They multiply the islands.

The moment that changed everything

The final push came from a strategy project at Gerhard Schubert GmbH. Schubert builds packaging machines, highly precise and reliable. I was asked to develop the company's digital strategy, a task I had done in similar form many times. But Schubert has one feature that seems minor at first glance: its machines always stand at the end of a production line. Chocolate, cheese, medicine or cosmetics, packaging is always the last step.

Whatever happens further up the line, a wrong temperature, an irregularity in the material, a coordination problem between two machines from different manufacturers: in the end, the packaging machine feels it. It stops, and the whole line stops with it. The Schubert machine has not failed. The problem lies between the companies, and no system is built to step in there.

The deeper I looked, the clearer it became: no better portal, no new app and no further SAP integration can solve this. The solution lies beyond the reach of any single company, because it has to emerge between companies.

> *The problem belongs to no one. It lies between the companies.*

What happens in that gap

Imagine you run maintenance at a plant. A machine is down. You look for the manual, the hotline number, the right part. The manufacturer has a portal you open once a month, if at all. In between there is an email, a phone and a lot of waiting.

Every time a machine is down and three parties are on the phone at once trying to figure out who is responsible, that is the gap. Every time a technician stands in front of a machine a colleague has already repaired three times, without knowing what was done back then, that is the gap. Every spare part ordered by phone or bought from the cheapest supplier because there is no connection to the machine goes through that gap.

It is invisible because it lies between systems. And it hits both sides: the operator loses time, the manufacturer loses touch with its machines and the spare parts business that should be theirs.

Why I founded the company

Once I understood the full extent of this gap, I knew that one more portal would not close it, not even a well-standardized one. As long as you think from the individual machine builder, you only ever build the next island. You have to think from the machine.

In 2021 I founded Transaction-Network. With it I answered the question I had first asked myself in 1998, only one level higher. Back then: how do I connect a company digitally with its customers? Today: how does everyone who keeps a machine running work in the same process, no matter which manufacturer built it?

After more than 20 years, I had what I would have lacked earlier: enough experience to understand the problem in its full depth, enough network to find the right partners, and enough calm to build something that lasts.

What Transaction-Network is today

One factory. Machines from several manufacturers. In one account.

That is the core. The operator keeps all of its machines in one account, including those from other manufacturers. Every machine builder brings what belongs to its machine: manual, spare parts, service. When a machine is down, everyone sees right away what is wrong, who can help and which part is missing. The fault becomes an order with all the information and everyone involved.

Existing systems stay in place. SAP, the maintenance system, the manufacturer's portal: Transaction-Network connects them. On top of that comes the Service Brain. It knows every machine and learns from every repair. I call the whole thing the Industrial Service Network.

Gerhard Schubert uses Transaction-Network in its after-sales business. UNITED GRINDING received the CECIMO MTI Award 2025 at EMO Hannover; in the award-winning solution, Transaction-Network provides the vendor-neutral customer portal. In 2023 Transaction-Network won the Allianz Industrie 4.0 Award Baden-Württemberg. Today, 80,000 machines are registered.

What I want to say

I tell this story because I know there are people out there, at machine builders and in plants, who feel what I felt back then in that strategy project. They know their tools were built for a world in which everyone only organizes their own side. And they sense that the next edge in service will come from where companies work together.

If you see it the same way, I look forward to talking with you.

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ABOUT TRANSACTION-NETWORK

Transaction-Network GmbH & Co. KG was founded in 2021 by Gerd Bart and is based in Gottmadingen on Lake Constance, Germany. The company develops a vendor-neutral service infrastructure for industry. Transaction-Network connects machines from different manufacturers in one shared network: a factory keeps all of its machines in one account. This makes collaboration between machine builders, machine operators and material suppliers simpler. Existing systems stay in place and are connected through Transaction-Network. This lets companies organize industrial service processes across company boundaries from one place and handle them efficiently.