



When you think of Nashville, Tennessee, you may call to mind the image of a glittering Country & Western star, dusty boots, satin fringe, slide guitars, a pick up truck, and the resonating pitch of a heartbroken twang. You probably don't immediately bring to mind an ultra-modern, smoothly humming, sleek, and secure, electronic, state-of-the-art information network that keeps the heart of the county government pumping away.

Maybe you should.

Just as country music has given itself a modern makeover, parlaying the popularity of crossover acts into MTV dollars, the home of the Grand Ole Opry, has given itself a cyber makeover. The Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County (Metro) has thrown aside the tradition-bound trappings of a non-integrated past to upgrade to the smooth style of a fully integrated future.

The Challenge

When Metro purchased and implemented modules of J.D. Edwards World software on its brand new AS/400, the government began, immediately, to improve business processes and communication government-wide.

Upon further inspection, the FASTnet department (Financial and Administrative Shared Teleprocessing Network), a division of Metro's Finance Department, realized that this upgrade in government-wide communication created the need for further improved sharing and dissemination of information in three specific areas. They concentrated on: customizations to J.D. Edwards, their new ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) software; added reporting capabilities; and the development of an Intranet for easy access to crucial data, reports, self-service applications, policies, procedures, announcements, and newsletters.

The FASTnet staff then began to define a list of specific projects, needs, and requirements for their software initiatives. One of their first proposals was for a Java-based management tool that

allowed managers of the government to monitor departmental accounts payable efficiency or compliance with terms in order to reduce credit costs. They also wanted to Web-enable their J.D. Edwards software and to create a more robust report writer than J.D. Edwards offered. Additionally, they wanted to have the ability to report real-time data, and they needed the development software to be very user-friendly.



The Solution

FASTnet decided to use the mrc-Productivity Series to meet these goals head-on. Joe Palmer, FASTnet Systems Advisor, on the decision to go with mrc, "The reason we began looking at mrc was that we wanted to make information more readily available on the corporate Intranet, and we were looking for an easier-to-see, easier-to-use format for presenting information so that

users wouldn't have to navigate through complicated J.D. Edwards menus."

The first prerequisite Palmer addressed, was that the software had to be compatible with their new AS/400. Then they looked for Web-capabilities, browser-based reporting tools, graphs, and overall presentation. "The needs that we had seemed to be right in line with what mrc offered. It was a great tool to find!"

Additionally, FASTnet didn't have an RPG programmer on staff at all. Joe Palmer considered his background, "As a systems advisor, I don't have a huge background in programming. In fact, I'm a power-user. I'm self-taught. Once I was able to turn my attention to the mrc-Productivity Series, I quickly discovered its versatility and value."

ERP Customization

In enhancing their ERP, FASTnet has developed a variety of applications using the mrc-Productivity Series. Palmer gave an example, "In one of J.D. Edward's applications for tracking investments, there is no ability to calculate the average daily balance from investments, and this was something that our treasury department wanted to keep track of. So, we just used a couple of mrc summary applications, and the treasury department was thrilled with the results."

One notable advantage to using the mrc-Productivity Series to customize its ERP is the long-term solution that the tool suite provides. If a company purchases an ERP package, such as J.D. Edwards, (HTE, or JBA, etc.) and makes that sizeable investment but wants to further customize the software for its specific needs, (e.g. adding additional fields) it has three basic development options. If a company has RPG programmers on staff, it can fight the impending learning curve issues (and the building application backlog) to have its own people modify the product. A company can also hire consultants, or choose a customization process offered by the ERP vendor. The third option is to use a tool like the mrc-Productivity Series.

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If a company chooses to either use its own people, or hire outside consultants/developers to do the ERP customization, the changes tend to be costly and the modifications are made to the actual source code of the software

package. That means that if, and when, the ERP comes out with its next version or upgrade, in upgrading the ERP, all of those customizations will be written over and the company will need to have all the customizations done all over again for the new version. The third option affords a safer bet. The mrc-Productivity Series customizes the ERP by writing around it, directly accessing the native database files that the ERP uses. Because of this, no changes are made to the actual ERP package, and when the software needs to be upgraded, any customizations made by the mrc-Productivity Series remain intact and valuable with the new version.

Reporting

According to Palmer, though he is very pleased with the efficiency that the switch to J.D. Edwards has afforded them, he relates that using the J.D. Edwards software can sometimes be complicated. "JDE is a good product but can be cumbersome for part-time users. For example, J.D. Edwards users often have an inability to find reports they need. Often the reports will be filed away in groups or forms, and are filed in a system-style naming convention that most users don't know, and therefore can't search. With the mrc-Productivity Series, however, we created a Web-based reporting glossary, which allows users to type in a keyword and search within a mini-search engine to find the reports that

they need. Just like when they are on the Web.”

Palmer and his team also linked a series of over 50 individual mrc apps to create a management information system for review of accounts payable processes. That system has been live for over a year, and they are well on their way to meeting their goal of speeding up bureaucratic processes to ensure that credit terms are met. The result is lower credit costs for the Government.

Another aspect of mrc report writing that Joe Palmer was interested in was the ability to do “left-outs” or “joins” meaning that if he were calling on records that had matches in two different files, they would inter-join. All the records from one file, and only the matching records from the secondary file, would be pulled.

Intranet: How they built it, and what they use it for.

Intranets are not a new concept by any stretch. Nevertheless, in the past, many Intranets were quite neglected. They were often run from a shared-server with access given to everyone in a particular office. As a result, they were regularly filled with outdated applications and useless information. The goal for the FASTnet Intranet portal was to make it easy to use and current. The plan was to assemble a voluntary committee to develop the look and feel of the portal. In

their outlined proposal, FASTnet staffers commented, “We are purchasing a tool that is much like purchasing a canvas and paint. You design the end product. It can be good, fast, and efficient. It can meet needs by being relevant and timely. On the other hand, it can be irrelevant, slow, clunky, outdated and inefficient.” It is important to choose wisely.

FASTnet did.

Joe Palmer’s most recent addition to the Intranet is an application that allows JDE users across the network to view FASTnet’s training curriculum and then sign up for training classes right on-line. Teachers can publish current curriculum on the Intranet, which allows users to add classes as needed right from their PC. Additionally, older classes automatically drop off the site, which eliminates time-consuming manual file maintenance.

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One of the more recent requests has been the ability to Web-enable the ERP programs for Intranets and/or Extranets. Metro was interested in that capability as well. Palmer relates, “We wanted existing J.D. Edwards

files to be put in Web-based format such as HTML, or PDF reports for easy accessibility. We also wanted the ability to use it on the Web, with users only able to manipulate the applications for presentation. We found that mrc was perfect for that.”

Conclusion

Joe Palmer is still happily employing the mrc-Productivity Series, and is continually developing new applications, finding fresh and creative ways to use the tool suite. “I don’t think there are any application types that we are not using. We’ve probably used them all. We started Java, and now we’ve moved into CGI.”

He continues, “While we’ve only taken baby steps to this point, the list of projects is growing. We continue to be pleased with the fantastic client support...the patience of the staff, and the responsiveness of development to meet our needs as we push the mrc-Productivity Series to new uses. mrc is a company whom I am honored to partner.”

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