

Business runs better on Microsoft.



Improving workflow at the WA Water and Rivers Commission

Company Background

The Water and Rivers Commission is a Western Australian State Government agency that works closely with all levels of government, industry and the community to protect and manage Western Australia's water resources, including wetlands, rivers, estuaries, inlets and groundwater.

Responsible to the minister for Water Resources, the commission aims to ensure that the State's water resources are managed to support sustainable development and conservation of the environment for the long-term benefit of the community.

The commission has more than 300 staff bringing together the scientific, technical and management expertise needed to manage the state's water resources.

Business Scenario

Document management and workflow

Apart from its water management role, an ongoing responsibility for the commission is answering inquiries about its operations from members of the public, special interest groups or politicians through their local Member of Parliament or through the government.

Generally, the minister for Water Resources forwards these inquiries to the commission. The commission receives more than ten of these per week, which all need to be directed to the correct member of staff to ensure an accurate and timely answer.

Each minister sets deadlines (generally within five to 14 days), depending on the level of inquiry, although this is logistically difficult in many cases. In addition, the commission is required to respond to parliamentary questions and Cabinet submissions. The commission also generates correspondence to the minister in the form of briefing notes on specific issues.

Until recently, the commission operated a manual system for processing this correspondence, whereby the paperwork relating to a specific inquiry was conveyed to the relevant person in a purple folder.

As keeping track of as many as 1,200 inquiries a year was a logistical nightmare, the commission recognised in 1998 that an automated workflow system could provide an effective computer-based mechanism to manage and monitor the status of ministerial correspondence it received and generated.

“Building on our existing Microsoft IT infrastructure and deploying Ultimus workflow software has enabled us to transform part of our business and reduce the time taken to respond to and track ministerial correspondence. The tool has also helped us identify bottlenecks in the system and redesign business processes.”

– Mr Rod Bickers,
Manager,

Information Services,
Water Rivers Commission

Web Site

www.wrc.wa.gov.au/

Industry

Government

Solution Summary

WA Water and River
Commission

Business Scenario

A major West Australian government agency has substantially improved the tracking of responses to ministerial questions through a Web-enabled application called Ultimus using Microsoft Exchange and SQL Server.

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Business Solution

Building a workflow management system

Perth-based Microsoft Certified Partner, Strategic Computer Solutions Pty Ltd (SCS), offered to implement a workflow management system called Ultimus, a US-developed software that is based on the Windows® Server platform running with Microsoft Exchange Server and SQL Server™. SCS worked with the WA Water and Rivers Commission to customise the Ultimus package into their existing technology and business processes. This new system is called MinTrac.

A central reason for selecting the SCS solution was its ability to deliver the required functionality through leveraging the existing software infrastructure, which was based on Microsoft technology.

Mr Bickers, Manager of Information Services at the Water and Rivers Commission, said they had been looking for a workflow package. “It became evident to us that this was a good solution for tracking correspondence,” he said. “Initially we were looking for a workflow package to enhance a statutory referral system we were building at the time. MinTrac has since been used for that system.”

Flexibility to address changing and growing business needs

“It certainly seemed to offer all the features we were after at the time. The way Ultimus worked, linking with Exchange, was one of the core requirements.

“The way it related to the commission’s organisational chart suited the way our business ran as well. We were looking for a system that could communicate with a position rather than a person.

“In any organisation, you have people moving around, going on leave, leaving the organisation entirely. We wanted to move that workload from one person to another as they moved around. We are talking about hierarchical workflow, from director, to manager to a member of the manager’s staff.

“We did a preliminary investigation of other applications that were not based around Exchange, but made the decision to move to the Microsoft platform rather than going down any other workflow path.”

Ensuring success by using a Microsoft Certified Partner – Strategic Computer Solutions Pty Ltd (SCS)

SCS is the Australian and New Zealand distributor for Ultimus, a product that has won a Microsoft award as the best communications and collaboration product and utilises Microsoft Windows Server technology and Microsoft SQL Server.

The company, which was named Microsoft’s Partner of the Year in Western Australia for 1999, has a blue chip client base that includes a number of government agencies as well as private sector companies.

Partner Details

Strategic Computer Solutions

Tel: 08 9223 1234

Email: info@scs.com.au

Web Site: www.scs.com.au

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Transforming the way you do business

As a result of implementing MinTrac, staff members are able to use the workflow functions within the system to track the location and status of a response to an inquiry from the agency's minister.

The MinTrac system has also delivered a boon to the commission's remote offices, using speedy Web access to give outback offices the same level of performance as metropolitan offices.

Rod Bickers further stated that a core responsibility of the Commission was to manage inquiries by stakeholders in the state's water resource management.

"Having effective and efficient systems to support the management of inquiries by stakeholders is essential to our business," he said.

Implementation of the system has allowed the Water and Rivers Commission to record a significant performance improvement by simplifying the process of locating the status of correspondence.

Whereas previously it was necessary to physically locate a file in order to identify its status, staff can now see its progress online with just a few keystrokes.

This automation of the process provides the commission with a lot more information about the progress of requests through the system and also assists in identifying ways in which to improve its operation by eliminating bottlenecks.

Capitalising on existing data and technology investment

SCS business development manager, Martin Kirby, said Ultimus was effective for managing and controlling workflow because it integrated with other systems for email and document management.

"Ultimus integrates with Microsoft Exchange, it sits on a Microsoft SQL Server database and all documentation is based in Microsoft Word," he said.

"The whole solution is very Microsoft-centric. Some of this was defined by the Ultimus product, such as the use of Windows NT and Internet Information Server, while the rest of the products came from the customer's requirement.

"The Commission is a very strong Microsoft house. Their infrastructure was such that they already run Exchange and Microsoft Office, so they wanted to take full advantage of those existing products."

Implementation of the \$40,000 system involved the creation of a series of workflow templates, ensuring that commission staff could easily locate and use the correct type of response form for different requests.

Requests range from correspondence and requirements for briefing notes to parliamentary questions and CEO correspondence, with each type of request having its own format for a response. The system templates enable staff members to select the correct response template from a dropdown list.

Benefits

Improved document tracking and business process refinement

After a nine-month development period, the commission ran MinTrac in a pilot program for 12 months before further modifications were made.

Mr. Bickers said the new system had improved performance significantly from a tracking point of view. "In the past, once a ministerial correspondence Inquiry left our ministerial Management group, we didn't have a good idea of where it was at any specific point of time," he said.

"The MinTrac system lets us know exactly where it is at any one time and the stage it's at. We also get statistical information so we can see where bottlenecks occur so we can work out how to improve processes about how to manage them."

Ease of use and staff familiarity with the interface

Another advantage of the system is the familiarity of its interface for any staff members that use it. Designed with Microsoft Exchange 5.5 running on Windows NT Server 4.0, the solution was designed on a Microsoft SQL Server database being accessed through a browser interface or through Microsoft Office products such as Word, or Outlook.

For example, if a staff member has a task to perform, the system will send an email that arrives in Outlook. This email includes a link to the Ultimus web site, which uses Internet Explorer to open a web page with a list of the tasks that need to be completed.

Internet ready

Since staff members access the system via the web, the hardware platform at the user end is largely irrelevant. A significant benefit of this is that people in 16 remote locations for the Water and Rivers Commission get almost the same performance and response as those at head office in Perth.

The MinTrac web site is published within the Water and Rivers Commission through Microsoft Internet Information Server.

Mr. Bickers said Ultimus on Exchange was the best product for the Water and Rivers Commission's requirements. "We have a significant investment in the product and we are now building on that," he said.

The Future

A demonstration of the value delivered by MinTrac is that it is now in use by a number of other West Australian government agencies. "Propagation to other agencies has gone by word of mouth," Mr Kirby said.

"Rather than coming at it from a technology solution, it has come from a business solution. Every agency faces the same problem handling ministerial correspondence. "Word gets around fairly quickly that someone has a good solution and it grows from there "We have ended up with a very good

Benefits

The workflow solution has brought about a number of immediate and cross organisation benefits such as, reduced time in responding to ministerial correspondence and briefings, an immediate document tracking facility via the MinTrac Web site and the ability to easily manage work across the organisation when people move or leave.

Microsoft Technology

Windows NT 4.0 Server

Office

Exchange 5.5

SQL Server

Internet Information Server

Other Technology

Ultimus Workflow software,

developed by Ultimus

Web Site: www.ultimus.com.au/

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standardised solution that you can almost pick up out of one place and drop into another, so we are talking to a large number of other agencies.

“To a large extent, we have an off-the-shelf ministerial correspondence tracking system, although it can be changed to meet the different needs of each agency.”

For more information about Microsoft products or services in Australia, contact Microsoft on 13 20 58. To access information via the Web, go to <http://www.microsoft.com/>

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