

ORGANIZATION

USFPO

COLD System Saves 2/3 of Hours Required to Close Books at Oregon National Guard

Implementation of a computer output to laser disk (COLD) system has reduced by two-thirds the number of hours required to close the books and perform other research-intensive tasks at the Oregon National Guard. In the past accountants and other members of the United States Property Fiscal Officers' (USPFO) staff spent much of their time searching through information stored on paper reports and microfiche. In an effort to improve this situation, information technology staff members evaluated alternative methods of publishing reports generated by the organization's custom financial applications to make them available to network users. They selected the Metafile content database because it saves additional time by automating the process of publishing the reports and allows users to search on any text contained in them as opposed to being limited to pre-defined fields. "The new COLD system provides enormous time savings," said Dennis Gately, Supervisory Accountant for the Oregon National Guard, Salem, Oregon. "It reduces the time needed to investigate a transaction from hours to a few minutes. The result is that one person can do what used to take three people in the past."

The Oregon National Guard is based in over 50 armories and facilities in 37 communities throughout the state. In order to defend and protect state and national interests, a wide variety of Army and Air National Guard units constantly train in order to meet any contingency. From the Guard's first mission of providing protection for settlers after the Whitman Massacre to

its current missions of providing state disaster relief, homeland defense, and global security missions, Oregon's men and women have always answered the call for those in need. The USPFO is responsible for managing the financial affairs of the



organization including paying employees, purchasing supplies and maintaining tight fiscal controls. The organization manages a \$100 million annual budget and processes 80,000 transactions every month.

Strict archiving requirements

The Oregon National Guard maintains financial records on custom applications that run on a Hewlett-Packard server running HP-UX. This software includes accounts payable, payroll and other financial applications that generate a large number of reports each month. As a government organization, the National Guard is also subject to very strict archiving requirements. In the past this requirement was met by downloading reports to nine-track tape and sending them to a service bureau that transferred them to two copies of microfiche.



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One copy was stored off-site to provide a secure archive, and the other copy was stored at the USPFO offices so that accountants and other financial staff members could access them to research expenditures and other financial

transactions. The problem in the past was that accessing these reports took a considerable amount of time. "Simply to research a single transaction might easily require going back through three or four different reports to obtain a complete understanding," Gately said. "If two of these reports were from the latest month, then the accountant could usually obtain them pretty easily but would still have to spend some time paging through the long documents to find the figures they needed. The situation was even more difficult in the common case where older records were needed to resolve the issue.

Then we had to search through microfiche which took even more time."

Faced with financial constraints that necessitated regular reductions in staffing, Gately and financial staff members asked the information technology team to look for a way to alleviate this tedious task. Joe Robinson, Senior Systems Administrator, evaluated a number of systems that are based on the principle of storing reports on a server where they can be accessed over the local area network. "We found a number of different programs that met our basic need," Robinson said. "But the Metafile



content server provides a few basic advantages that sets it apart from the others. The most important is the program's unique full text search capabilities. The other packages would have made it necessary for us to define in advance which fields in which reports our users could use to locate individual records and would have made it difficult or impossible to search on fields that hadn't been defined. With Metafile, on the other hand, users can simply type in whatever information they have, a check number, an invoice number, a date, a payee, or whatever, and call the record up in seconds. We also liked the fact that Metafile offers an imaging system that integrates well with COLD and that it makes it very easy to automate the process of archiving reports."

Quick implementation

It only took Robinson about eight hours to configure the Metafile content database to automatically capture, index and archive the organization's reports. To add a new report he simply put it into the stream that is exported to the output queue, then he went into the Metafile administrator and established a definition for it. The entire process takes about 5 minutes. From that point on the software automatically scans the specified location for the files; and if they are found, it automatically downloads them to the server and indexes them so that they are available to users within a few minutes of their creation. After configuring the server, Robinson spent a few additional days installing the client software and training users. The USPFO can now produce archives simply by writing the database to a CD which is far less expensive than producing microfiche. Each CD contains a viewer application viewable even if the company were to switch to different archiving

software. The CDs also make it possible for authorized employees to work from home simply by downloading the records they need. Robinson said that a key factor in the successful implementation was the high level of technical support provided by the vendor. "They are very prompt in addressing any problems that we have," he said.



Gately said that the software met his expectations from the very beginning by drastically reducing the amount of time required to research financial transactions. The COLD system's full text search capability makes it possible to search for a particular invoice by entering any of the information it contains. This feature makes it possible to search for a specific dollar amount, for example, if for some reason the invoice number or customer number is not known. "The labor savings are pretty dramatic," he said. "Instead of spending hours looking for the supporting transactions for a particular invoice, we just punch in a number and have the all reports at our fingertips with the cursor on the transactions that we are looking for. The ability to sort through large amounts of data and extract just what we need with a single engine multiplies the amount of productive work that we can achieve. These timesavings are especially valuable in the extremely busy period when we are closing the books for the month. We can get the job done in less time with fewer people and still leave the office at six p.m. rather than midnight."

Responding faster to inquiries

The faster flow of information also makes it possible to provide better service to governmental staff members, officers, employees and others that request information. "For example, if a customer called and had a question about a transaction, we used to have to manually search pages of microfiche to locate the item. Once found, efforts to contact the customer often resulted in a game of 'telephone tag'. With MetaViewer, we can easily call up the relevant report, punch in the target data element and give the customer an immediate answer. If they wish a copy of the report or just the specific page, we can print and fax the answer in minutes." Overall, we can respond much more quickly and save ourselves time in the process."

"Over the past decade, we have faced continual budget cuts," Gately concluded. "Technology has kept us afloat by allowing us to get more done with less people. While many different software and hardware products have made contributions, in my opinion, Metafile's has been the largest. It has freed us from the tedium of searching through paper and microfiche reports by giving us instant access to our data. My peers in other National Guard organizations around the country have expressed interest in this technology, and I am in the process of preparing a presentation to explain exactly how it works. The conclusion is going to be that we simply couldn't do our job at our current staffing levels without Metafile or something very similar to it."

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the individuals mentioned and not of the Oregon National Guard which does not endorse specific products.

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