

INDUSTRY

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COLD and Imaging System Saves Corn Processor 200+ Hours/Week

Since implementing a new computer output to laser disk (COLD) and imaging system, Minnesota Corn Processors, LLC saves more than 200 hours per week that was formerly spent organizing, indexing, downloading and searching for information. The COLD system automatically captures reports created on the company's AS/400 and stores them in a central document database, eliminating the 80-100 hours per week previously spent organizing, downloading and indexing reports manually. Another main area of time savings, nearly 40 hours per week, comes from faster access to information made possible by the new system. Now, instead of needing five minutes to find a stored document, users perform full-text searches of the document database to find what they need in a few seconds. In addition, the imaging system digitally captures paper forms such as vendor invoices and shipping documents, making these accessible in seconds as well.

Minnesota Corn Processors (MCP), LLC, Marshall, Minnesota, was established as a farmer-owned cooperative in 1980 and began its corn wet milling operations in 1983. The company employs more than 500 people and converts corn into various products, including corn syrup, corn starch and ethanol. Today more than 5,000 stockholders in Minnesota, South Dakota,

Iowa, and Nebraska make up the membership of MCP. The presence of the MCP plant sites in Minnesota and Nebraska has raised the value of the entire corn crop for both areas, making growers less dependent on export sales.

Limits of early programs

MCP uses Infinium's ERP system

Even though MCP had used COLD and imaging technology in the past, the company was able to achieve dramatic productivity gains by upgrading to a new system with more advanced capabilities.

running on a Model 830 IBM AS/400 computer to manage its operations. Realizing the advantage of distributing information electronically, the company first installed COLD & imaging technology from a different vendor in the mid-1990s.

However, the limitation of this early program kept them from delivering the anticipated productivity gains. For example, although the earlier COLD system captured reports from the AS/400, someone still had to organize, download and index the reports manually. This took approximately 80-100 hours per week. The earlier imaging system required additional administrative time because as documents were scanned, someone also had to create an index for each document

ORGANIZATION

Minnesota Corn Processors

so the system would be able to locate it. This was done by manually typing in key words related to the document, such as the customer or supplier name, order number, batch number, and so on. The process was time-consuming and introduced the possibility for error. Another limitation of the previous software was that while it was supposed to permit full-text searches of the database, that feature did not work very well. "We mainly searched on specific index fields," says Amme Houseman, a programmer at MCP. "So it took longer than it should have to find stored documents. It usually took about five minutes to find the document you were looking for." In addition, both the COLD and imaging systems were unstable and tended to crash frequently, requiring a great deal of maintenance.

MCP management realized that COLD and imaging had the potential to save even more staff time, so they decided to upgrade to new software. A few of their requirements were affordability, ease of use and support for the PCL format. PCL is the printer control language for Hewlett Packard and compatible laser printers. It is generated by the program that MCP uses to create checks and invoices. Also, MCP wanted good integration between COLD and imaging. They learned that



while it was easy to find an economical solution to address one of these needs in isolation; the systems capable of handling both COLD and imaging in a single integrated solution were generally more expensive and had an extensive implementation timeline.

Then they heard about Metafile, a Rochester, Minnesota-based company that offers COLD, imaging, and workflow in a single integrated solution at a very reasonable price. Metafile provides print capture and imaging products that feed a single print output and imaging warehouse. The COLD system is capable of capturing documents in the PCL format (in addition to many others such as AFP, DJDE and PDF,) and all documents can be easily written to CD-ROM, DVD or hard drives for storage. The information stored in the document warehouse can be accessed with a viewer client or over the web. An additional factor in Metafile's favor was that they were willing to handle the conversion of MCP's existing data into the Metafile format.

The software installation, performed by a Metafile representative at MCP's facility, took about one week. Another Metafile representative visited MCP after he had analyzed their legacy data and created a program for converting the legacy data to the Metafile format. He installed that program and trained the MCP staff in how to use it. "The technical support from Metafile was excellent," says Houseman. "Their people were very helpful and they made the data conversion process easy for us to handle on our own."

Productivity improvements

The COLD system reads spool files from the AS/400 and converts them to compact,

searchable files that reside on a Novell file server. The software scans a specified location on the AS/400 for a new spool file and, if it is found, downloads and indexes it. This happens automatically several times during the day according to a schedule that was defined during the initial installation. The software's ability to do this without user intervention has eliminated the 80-100 hours per week that were spent organizing, downloading and indexing reports. The new system also makes information available on a more timely basis since it is available to users almost as soon as reports are created.

The software's full-text search capability permits users to search for documents by entering words or numbers from anywhere in the entire document. For example, if someone has forgotten the name of a trucker but remembers the amount of corn they delivered, they can search on that number and find the documents related to that shipment. The full-text search capability has decreased the time needed to find documents to only a few seconds. With 15-20 users performing 10 queries each day, a very conservative estimate, the company has improved productivity considerably. In addition to enabling people to work more efficiently, the faster access to information also helps improve dealings with customers and suppliers. For example, when someone calls with a question, the MCP representative can search the database and get the answer while the person is still on the phone rather than calling back later.

The imaging system permits the same on-line access for scanned documents such as vendor invoices and shipping forms. These documents are captured digitally using a scanner and stored in the same database

as the COLD documents. The person who does the scanning no longer types an index because the Metafile system has a feature called "Match and Merge" that requires only one unique identifier per document. For example, before an invoice from a particular vendor is scanned, the operator types in a code that identifies that vendor. The imaging system pulls all the pertinent information about that supplier from the AS/400 and stores it with the invoice in the document database. "That saves a lot of time and eliminates errors since the imaging system is pulling accurate information from the AS/400," says Houseman.

Both the COLD and imaging portions of the Metafile system have been very stable, eliminating the time previously spent on system maintenance. "The stability problems we had with the old system are solved. These programs don't crash," says Houseman. Although MCP is currently using the Windows client application to access the document database, it is considering web access in the future. "Eventually we want to allow for the convenience of web access to the document database for all employees," Houseman adds.

Even though MCP had used COLD and imaging technology in the past, the company was able to achieve dramatic productivity gains by upgrading to a new system with more advanced capabilities. The ability of the Metafile system to automatically retrieve and index documents according to a prearranged schedule combined with its full-text search capability gives MCP more than 200 additional hours each week.

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