

APCO WORLDWIDE

Solution Overview

Industry

Public Relations

Microsoft Business Solutions Partner

EI Resource Corporation
London, England, United Kingdom
Scotts Valley, California, USA

Scenario

Problems moving data between the project accounting and financial accounting systems led to inaccurate and slow billing processes.

Benefits

Since installing Microsoft Business Solutions, APCO has increased billing accuracy, decreased redundant data entry and improved their financial standing.

Software Used

Microsoft Business Solutions—Solomon
Financial Management
Project Management
Customization Tools
Microsoft SQL Server™
Microsoft Windows® Advanced Server

Demographic Information

Annual Revenue: \$46 Million USD
Number of Employees: 425
Number of Sites: 25
Number of Users: 74

Migrated from mainframe-based accounting and PC-based time and billing software

A tight integration between project and financial accounting systems using Microsoft Business Solutions has helped APCO Worldwide unify their offices around the world and increase their profit margin by three percent.

APCO Worldwide is a global public affairs and strategic communications firm with offices throughout North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Headquartered in Washington, DC, APCO was founded in 1984 with one small office. Today, the company has 23 offices in 11 countries and more than 400 employees.

The firm's clients include six of the top ten Fortune 500 companies as well as hundreds of other corporations, governments, industry associations and non-profit organizations. Core services include government relations, issues management, market entry, opinion research, corporate positioning, media relations, litigation and crisis communications, investor relations and strategic philanthropy.

Business Challenge

APCO's dramatic growth and global expansion over the past decade created challenges in meeting customer expectations and maintaining internal controls. Until recently, the company shared a mainframe-based financial accounting system and used a PC-based project management system to track time and expenses and generate invoices. Employees entered their time on paper forms that were input into the project management system by administrative staff in each office. Invoices were generated from the project management system and then input into the accounting system. Most reports had to be created manually on spreadsheets due to limitations in the project management system.

"The fact that everything had to be entered at least twice created the potential for errors," says Chrystal Kern, Worldwide Chief Financial Officer for APCO Worldwide. "For example, we might forget to enter an invoice or have difficulty deciphering what was billable revenue and what wasn't. Later, when we reconciled the two systems we often found old items that hadn't been billed to clients. Delays and mistakes in moving information between the two systems often caused billings to go out late or to become overdue without anyone knowing."

The Search for a Solution

The company set out to establish a billing and accounting system that would function seamlessly, accurately and quickly. The most critical challenge came from the global nature of operations, including the fact that many projects involve staff members from offices all over the world. APCO needed a global accounting system that could be implemented throughout the world while bridging cultural, language and statutory requirements. Management also required improved reporting capabilities which would allow for timely business decisions.

“The cash savings in the first year alone amount to 40 percent of the entire cost to develop and implement the system worldwide.”

Chrystal Kern
Worldwide Chief Financial Officer
APCO Worldwide

Kern evaluated all of the leading mid-market solutions and narrowed the field down to two that offered full-featured, integrated project management functionality.

“When we got the details, it was clear that Microsoft® Business Solutions—Solomon was the only company that would meet our overall requirements, which included project management capability in a multicurrency environment,” Kern says. “Even still, customization was required to allow clients to be billed at a pre-agreed rate and in a specific currency.”

APCO selected Microsoft Business Solutions reselling partner EI Resource Corporation (EIRC) to perform the customization and assist in the global implementation of the system. They have since released this customization as an add-on module to the product.

Return on Investment

Integrating Operations on a Global Basis

Microsoft Business Solutions has helped to integrate APCO's operations on a global basis while virtually eliminating inaccuracies and delays. The new system uses the U.S. dollar as the base currency but calculates the results for each office in local currency as well as the dollar.

Employees now log into a secure Web site from anywhere in the world and submit time and expenses using the Desktop module. This eliminates the need for re-entry of time sheets, meaning information is entered into the system much more quickly and accurately, which helps keep budgets current.

Improved Reporting

The new solution has also made a dramatic improvement in reporting, allowing decisions to be made based on current, relevant information. Projects can be analyzed in either the base currency or the local currency. The base currency is used most often for projects that involve multiple offices and multiple currencies.

Reports can be generated on any project, practice group, office or other entity that managers elect to define and in any currency. In the event of a reorganization or merger, new units can be quickly created and historic reporting can be generated. APCO plans to implement an additional capability that will allow managers to access reports over the Web and make information instantly available to clients through an extranet.

Impact on the Bottom Line

The implementation was completed first in the U.S. and the results were apparent almost immediately. Client write-offs due to accounting errors have been eliminated and the new solution has dramatically reduced older account receivables. These changes have allowed APCO to increase the bottom line by three percent. Savings for the first year in the U.S. alone amounted to 40 percent of the entire cost to develop and implement the system worldwide.

For more information about Microsoft Business Solutions, visit www.microsoft.com/BusinessSolutions

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