



APCO Worldwide

Global Public Affairs Group Tightens Integration Between Projects and Accounting

Overview

Country: United States

Industry: Public Affairs

Customer Profile

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., APCO Worldwide is a global public affairs and strategic communication firm with offices throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Business Situation

APCO Worldwide needed a better solution for integrating its project accounting and financial accounting systems.

Solution

APCO Worldwide deployed Microsoft® Business Solutions–Solomon including the Solomon Desktop, Financials, and Project Accounting modules.

Benefits

- Global integration of operations
- Improved reporting
- Positive impact on bottom line

“Microsoft Business Solutions–Solomon was the only solution that would meet our overall requirements, which included project management capability in a multicurrency environment.”

Chrystal Kern, Worldwide Chief Financial Officer, APCO Worldwide

APCO Worldwide, a global public affairs and strategic communication firm, needed a better solution for integrating its project accounting and financial accounting systems. A tight integration between project and financial accounting capabilities in Microsoft® Business Solutions–Solomon helped APCO Worldwide unify its offices around the world and increase its profit margin by three percent.

“These improvements in productivity have also made it possible to increase our revenues by 25 percent in the past two years without any increase in administrative staff.”

Chrystal Kern, Worldwide Chief Financial Officer, APCO Worldwide

Situation

APCO Worldwide is a global public affairs and strategic communication firm with offices throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., 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.

APCO’s dramatic growth and expansion to global scope 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 either entered their time on paper forms that were input into the project management system by administrative staff in each office, or they used TimeSlips or other systems to enter their time. 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.”

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 its 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 that would allow for timely business decisions.

Kern evaluated all of the leading mid-market accounting systems 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 solution 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 reseller The Resource Corporation (RC) to perform the customization and assist in the global implementation of the system. The Resource Corporation has since released this customization as an add-on module to the Solomon core application and Solomon Desktop.

The solution was deployed using Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000 running on the Microsoft Windows® 2000 Advanced Server operating system. SQL Server 2000 is part of the Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software.

Benefits

APCO Worldwide is enjoying several benefits from its deployment of Microsoft Business Solutions—Solomon, including integration of operations on a global basis, improved reporting, and a positive impact on the bottom line.

Integration of Operations on a Global Basis

Solomon 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 its base currency but calculates the results for each office both in the dollar and in local currency—and can bill clients in a third currency. Employees now log on to a secure Web site from anywhere in the world and submit time and expenses using the Solomon 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 up to date.

Improved Reporting

The new solution also provides a dramatic improvement to reporting capabilities, allowing for improved decision making 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

re-organization or merger, new units can be quickly created and historic reporting can be generated. APCO plans to implement new Microsoft Business Portal capabilities that will allow managers to access reports over the Web and make information instantly available to clients through an extranet.

Positive Impact on Bottom Line

The implementation was completed first in the United States and the results were apparent almost immediately. Client write-offs have been eliminated and the new solution has dramatically reduced older account receivables. These changes have allowed APCO to increase its bottom line by 3 percent. Savings for the first year in the United States alone amounted to 40 percent of the entire cost to develop and implement the system worldwide.

Duplicate entry of data and time sheets has been eliminated, creating a much more efficient accounting team. Staff has been able to shift from data entry to more productive and fulfilling tasks. "These improvements in productivity have also made it possible to increase our revenues by 25 percent in the past two years without any increase in administrative staff," Kern says.

For More Information

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For more information about The Resource Corporation products and services, call (415) 970-0897 in the United States, (+44) 20 8492 3939 for the London headquarters, or visit the Web site at www.resourcecorp.com.

For more information about APCO Worldwide products and services, visit the Web site at www.apcoworldwide.com.

For more information about Microsoft Business Solutions, go to www.microsoft.com/businesssolutions/.

Microsoft Business Solutions

Microsoft Business Solutions offers integrated business applications and services that allow small and mid-sized organizations and divisions of large enterprises to connect employees, customers, and suppliers for improved efficiency. The financial management, customer relationship management, supply chain management, and analytics applications work with Microsoft products such as Microsoft Office and Windows to streamline processes across an entire organization, giving businesses insight to respond rapidly, plan strategically, and execute quickly. Microsoft Business Solutions are delivered through a worldwide network of channel partners that provide specialized services and local support tailored to a company's needs.

Software and Services

- Products
 - Microsoft SQL Server 2000
 - Microsoft Windows 2000 Advanced Server
- Solutions

- Microsoft Business Solutions—Solomon
 - Solomon Desktop
 - Financials
 - Project Accounting

Hardware

- Intel-based servers

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