

A brush of data management genius

By: Stefan Dubowski

ICI Canada Inc. makes paint, but judging by the amount of paper the company was going through a few years ago, you might have figured it was in the forestry products industry.

ICI Canada, headquartered in Concord, Ont., was using thousands of sheets of paper for invoices, order forms, sales reports and other financial information, all of which supported the company's massive pigment output. As part of ICI Group, a global firm, ICI Canada helps churn out 300 million gallons of paint every year. ICI Group operates 55 paint manufacturing sites in 120 countries and employs 35,000 workers. The company produces Ralph Lauren and CIL paints.

It's a lot of product and a large company, but ICI Canada's paper usage was over the top. According to Lee Fortney, the Canadian arm's IT director, ICI Canada's employees would pile pages on or near their desks, and sometimes they created their own filing schemes to keep track of the data.



The distributed and haphazard document management system placed a big burden on ICI Canada's IT department, too. The company operated heavy-duty printers in the data centre, and it was up to IT staff members to distribute the pages coming from those devices to people elsewhere in the enterprise. ICI Canada was spending \$25,000 per year printing customer statements alone.

The firm sought an electronic archiving and retrieval system to help tame the paper problem. "The idea initially was to reduce the overall manual paper distribution," Fortney says.

In 2001 the company installed FileNexus, a data repository system made by Toronto's Loris Technologies Inc. The software captures documents as they're created on employees' computers, stores the information and serves it up on screen when workers need to access data.

Now the company is printing some 65,000 fewer pages per month. Employees no longer need to keep leaning towers of paper on their desks; and the IT staffers get to focus on technology projects instead of acting as printer gophers. "We're saving IT costs," Fortney says.

After using FileNexus to solve the internal documents problem, ICI Canada used the system to better correspond with its retail partners, the 200-odd Color Your World and Glidden stores throughout the nation. ICI Canada gave those retail outlets Web access to FileNexus, so the stores would be able to get information about orders, invoices and customer bills quicker. Fortney says store operators seem impressed with this feature. "It just saves them time and energy."

ICI Canada might be part of a larger movement as manufacturers no longer satisfied with unruly data management processes turn to new technologies like electronic archival and retrieval systems and storage devices to better control their data.

But as with any high-tech trend, there are aspects of new data management technologies that manufacturers should beware, including the need for end user training and concerns about vendor support.

ICI Canada's greatest challenge with FileNexus had less to do with the technology and more to do with people. Although it took just a few days to install the system and get it operational, the company had to coax some staff members into using it. "People in operational positions, such as credit...were easy [to convince]," Fortney says.

"When they're on the phone with a customer, they can very easily reference a customer's invoice on the screen."

Others required a helping hand via training sessions, "not that it's hard to learn," Fortney is quick to add. "It's just that these are businesspeople; learning IT is not their job."

Fortney suggests seeking out technology that not only meets baseline requirements, but is also easy for users to wrap their heads around. "If it's not 100 per cent easy to use, they'll probably go for that stack of paper."

ICI Canada tackles the need for employee education in a couple of ways: it offers training sessions; and it tries to encourage employees to use FileNexus whenever they print documents. "We had a cover-page distributed with all of the reports saying...is this a report that you could effectively retrieve from FileNexus?" Fortney explains. "We continually stress that, and over time they recognize the benefit of going for online reports."



While ICI Canada may well have a handle on end user training, most companies do not budget enough time or money for this important aspect of new technology projects, says Tony Asaro, a senior analyst at the Enterprise Storage Group (ESG), a data-systems consultancy in Milford, Mass.

“It’s end user training, but it’s also a cultural shift,” Asaro says, suggesting that manufacturers should not underestimate the training element, and they should be prepared to devote significant time and money to the effort. “In general, the majority of companies don’t adequately prepare for it.” Dutailier, a furniture maker in St. Pie, Que., seems to be doing all it can to prepare for new technology implementations, perhaps just as the firm prepared for a new form of home entertainment by offering a novel sort of comfort to match the trend towards DVDs, surround sound stereo systems and high-definition, wide-screen televisions.

Dutailier’s specialty is the “gliding rocker,” a modernized version of the rocking chair that, according to this manufacturer, is becoming popular beside home-entertainment systems, the likes of which require super-comfy backside support for maximum viewing enjoyment.

The firm is worth approximately \$85 million and it’s growing at a rate of 10 to 12 per cent every year.

But so much growth puts pressure on Dutailier’s enterprise resource planning (ERP) system (an SAP AG program), and its Microsoft Corp. SQL Server database. The growth also puts pressure on Patrick Jacques, Dutailier’s IT administrator, charged with helping to ensure that the company’s high-tech infrastructure can handle the influx of data.

More often than he’d care to remember, Jacques used to have to spend weekends at work to add direct-attached storage space to the SQL Server. To speed up database management and ensure Dutailier had enough storage space for its ever-growing stock of information, the company installed EMC Corp.’s CX400, a storage device. Jacques says the EMC product lets him stay away from the office on weekends.

“I added space to the server two weeks ago...It took 15, 20 minutes,” a weekday lunch-hour enhancement.

Dutailier employs a number of best practices to ensure that new equipment like the CX400 acts more as boons than banes for the IT department and the company as a whole. For instance, the firm only purchases devices that are tested with the existing ERP program, says Paul Landry, the IT director.

“We have a strict rule here at Dutailier: we must - and this is a big, big must - we must have proof that the environment is stable with the SAP product.”

Everything from operating systems, to servers and storage devices must work smoothly with the ERP software. “I had to buy a fully completed solution,” Landry says, explaining why Dutailier chose EMC in the first place. EMC teams with Dell Inc., the computer manufacturer. The EMC-Dell crew offered a storage-server combo that supported Dutailier’s ERP system.

Dutailier is also in the habit of purchasing proven equipment, which is why it opted for the CX400, a product that EMC is replacing with the CX500, announced earlier this year. Although the CX500 saves more information, faster than the CX400 and it was available when Dutailier needed the storage system, the furniture maker opted for the older, established device, instead of the new platform.

“We were a little bit scared that it was too much of a new technology for us,” Landry says. “So we downsized a bit with the option of the CX500 upgrade at an extremely good price.”

Dutailier’s decision to purchase an EMC-Dell platform, instead of a cobbled-together mix of storage and servers, speaks to an emerging inclination among companies: firms increasingly seek the benefits of storage packages put together by vendors.

“There’s not a lot of finger pointing,” compared with commingled systems, which can leave companies desperate for support from one vendor or another as each blames the other for whatever trouble might crop up with the platform. Buck-passing “can actually introduce days, even weeks, into the process of solving major problems,” Asaro says.

Landry advises other manufacturers to mind the details when purchasing storage equipment. For instance, he says he was impressed that EMC could send Canadian technicians to help install the CX400. Local support makes the vendor easier to work with, especially on complicated IT projects. “It’s like I’m flying a 727, but the pilot is in the room next to me, and can come in at the snap of a finger.”

Fortney from ICI Canada says it’s important for data-management systems to be easy for end users to learn, or else manufacturers might discover that their high-priced, high-tech installations go unused, and ultimately prove to be a burden on the bottom line, rather than the helpful tools that they were meant to be.



Loris Technologies Inc.

208 Evans Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M8Z 1J7

Tel.: (416) 252-4701 Fax: (416) 253-7849 sales@loristech.com www.loristech.com