

APCO WORLDWIDE

Solution Overview

Industry

Public Relations

Microsoft Business Solutions

Partner El Resource Corporation
London, England
Scotts Valley, California

Scenario

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

Solution

Microsoft Dynamics – Solomon has helped to integrate APCO's operations on a global basis while virtually eliminating inaccuracies and delays.

Benefits

Since installing Microsoft Dynamics – Solomon, APCO has increased billing accuracy, decreased data re-entry and improved its financial standing worldwide.

Software Used

Microsoft Dynamics – Solomon
Solomon Desktop
Financials
Project Accounting
Microsoft SQL Server
Microsoft Windows 2000 Advanced Server

Demographic Information:

Annual Revenue: \$46 million USD
Number of Employees: 425
Number of Users: 74
Number of sites: 25

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

A tight integration between project and financial accounting capabilities in Microsoft Dynamics – Solomon helped APCO Worldwide unify its offices around the world and increase its profit margin by three percent.

Company Overview

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 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 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."

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

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Chrystal Kern
Worldwide Chief Financial Officer
APCO Worldwide

requirements. Management also required improved reporting capabilities which 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 Dynamics – 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 reseller EI Resource Corporation (EIRC) to perform the customization and assist in the global implementation of the system. EIRC has since released this customization as an add-on module to Solomon Desktop.

Benefits

Integrating 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 US dollar as its 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 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 a new Solomon Desktop capability that will allow managers to access reports over the web and make information instantly available to clients through an extranet.

Impact on Bottom Line

The implementation was completed first in the US 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 three percent. Savings for the first year in the US 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

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administrative staff,” Kern says.