Upside Research

COMPANY
MSB International Plc

PRODUCT SOLUTION COMPONENTS
Metastorm e-Work Platform

INDUSTRY
Recruitment Services

CHALLENGES
A publicly traded company, MSB is a leading provider of permanent and contract IT, telecoms, finance, accounting and sales professionals. As it grew, MSB found that its sales people were spending more and more time getting new contracts and paperwork completed and approved, instead of spending the time identifying new opportunities. Its team of VB programmers couldn't develop solutions fast enough, or change them often enough, to provide a viable and practical solution.

SOLUTION
MSB chose Metastorm's e-Work BPM Platform to implement its critical project initiation forms, reducing process completion time from hours to minutes, and achieving a complete ROI within six months.

RESULTS
MSB achieved some very specific results from the automation of their project initiation process, including: reduced time (from one hour or more to five minutes), increased efficiency (e-Work could automatically gather some of the information required), and greater productivity (salespeople went back to selling, instead of shepherding papers around the office). At a corporate level, it has helped to provide an auditable trace for processes, increased business continuity, and enabled more targeted sales efforts.

ABOUT METASTORM
Metastorm provides business process management solutions to global 2,000 firms. Designed for people-intensive automation requirements, its e-Work BPM platform is used by more than 400 companies worldwide.

Founded in 1996, Metastorm is a privately held, venture-backed company located in Columbia, Maryland.

Overview

Sometimes, it's hard to tell where the time goes. For an individual that might not be such a bad thing, but for a rapidly growing company like MSB International Plc, it can mean serious trouble. A provider of human capital and recruitment services (i.e., permanent employees and contractors), MSB serves a large number of clients across industry sectors throughout the UK, Ireland, Germany, and other countries. However, as it grew, MSB found that its salespeople were spending too much time on the paperwork related to the initiation of new projects instead of focusing on selling.

After trying some in-house developed Visual Basic solutions that quickly became unmanageable, MSB decided to purse a business process management (BPM) solution as its approach for gluing together disparate applications and departments necessary to streamline a project initiation process. After selecting Metastorm's e-Work BPM Platform, MSB was able to complete its first process automation within three months, and obtain 100% payback of its initial investment six months later. In many respects, this MSB customer implementation is a good example of what happens when a BPM technology selection and deployment goes right.

Business Problem

"We didn't realize how much time people spent filling in forms," says Rob Marston, IT Manager at MSB. "We had a very inefficient process that actually required very little interaction with the salesmen, but lots of interaction with a variety of departments."

What was happening was this: any time a salesperson sold a new job, he (or she) would have to fill out two contracts—one for the client, and one for the contractor who would be doing the work—and then shepherd them around to various departments to get the proper information filled out. This often involved over an hour of time, and probably eight different departments, to obtain information on things like the client's payment history and the contractor's financial, payment and tax information. Rather than wait for the paperwork to wind its way through the organization, sales people preferred to hand carry it, because their performance (and pay) was based on getting the contracts approved and finalized. The sooner the process was completed, the quicker they'd be paid. So the salespeople assumed the burden of taking the extra hour or so to ensure that all the appropriate pieces of information were filled in.

While MSB considered other options to address the problem, they didn't turn out to be feasible. The process required too much detailed knowledge to pass off to secretaries, and an earlier attempt at automation using Microsoft's Visual Basic failed. A team of four developers was able to create an automated process using Visual Basic, but the program proved so hard to manage and update that it quickly fell behind the real-life process needs. "We tried VB, but it was uncontrollable," says Marston. "There were too many lines of code and the lead time to make changes was long. As a result, the users grew frustrated and the automated process got further away from what the users were actually doing."

Knowing that it needed a different type of solution, MSB investigated both Staffware and Metastorm as potential business process management (BPM) solutions. After detailed technical and financial consideration, MSB decided Metastorm was the best fit for its particular needs.

Solution Details

A key reason that MSB chose Metastorm was that it had an open database schema, so that MSB could access the process information in the Metastorm e-Work solution from external sources. Once the selection was made, MSB sent two developers to Metastorm's one-week training class, where they learned the fundamentals of the environment and tools. The developers then installed e-Work on their laptops, along with a Microsoft SQLServer database, and proceeded to develop the application.

By working with e-Work's graphical designer, they were able to quickly fashion the rough outlines of the process and work on filling in the details. e-Work's graphical interface made the job easier and the developers found the tool simple to use. The key issue they found was to identify where the data in each step of the process is coming from—which system, application, or database.

"Metastorm e-Work is like paperwork glue," says Marston. "It allows you to glue all your programs together throughout the company." For example, MSB had a wide variety of applications that needed to be part of their primary processes, including DOS-based applications, HR applications, Windows NT and Exchange databases, and facilities management applications.

Without any assistance from Metastorm (other than the initial training class), MSB was able to roll out a completely automated process within three months. Now, once a project is sold, the sales person simply has to input a limited amount of information about it into a Web-based form created by e-Work. The e-Work application then takes care of consolidating the additional information, and securing any required approvals, as well as entering the sale into the main payment system at the end of the process. With approximately a £50,000 investment in e-Work, MSB was able to save over £100,000 the first year, from greater efficiencies in the sales process and increased productivity of the sales people. By MSB's calculations, e-Work paid for itself and achieved 100% ROI within six months. The solution also reduced the amount of time required to complete the project initiation process from an hour or more down to approximately five minutes—a huge time and resource savings.

In addition, the new solution is much more adaptable than MSB's previous VB-based solution—a key business benefit. MSB now makes changes to the processes on the fly, ensuring that new business rules or decisions are implemented as quickly as possible. Developers spend only an hour or so each week maintaining the system, and new processes or changes are easily made. MSB also found that having the process defined and available to review has made big changes in how employees view what they're doing. "In the old days, people knew how their departments worked, but with e-Work you can map out all your processes, then you can see the interactions among different departments. We've found that people naturally like to look at the complete process and quickly identify new insights into the process, including ways to simplify them as well as ways to save money," says Marston.

Since implementing the initial process, MSB has automated approximately 15 other processes, including help desk forms, vacation and holiday processes, and the new user process. This last process automatically handles many of the tasks required when a new employee is hired, not only filling out the appropriate government, tax, and employment forms, but also creating email accounts, passwords, database entries, and adding that user to a group on the network.
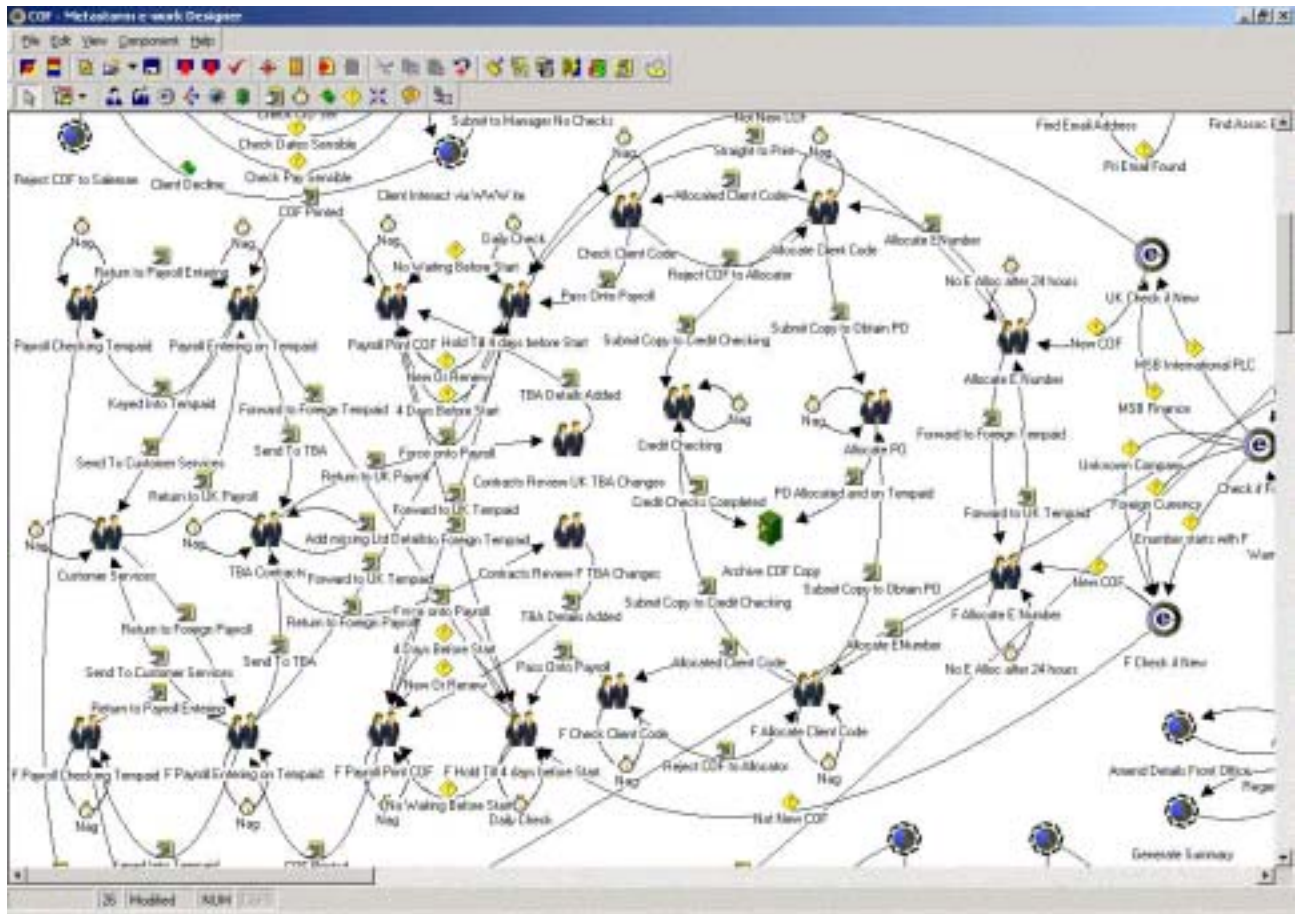
Figure 1: A sample flow diagram of a process that MSB designed in e-Work

MSB pays 20% of its initial purchase price for ongoing maintenance, including software updates and help desk support. Two Metastorm servers running RAID-5 are the backbone of the application, with 150 users based in the headquarters location, and 50 users dispersed throughout other European locations.

Overall, MSB is very satisfied with the Metastorm e-Work product. It would like to see a few minor enhancements to the product, such as more streamlined handling of sub-processes, more robust entry validation capabilities, and increased performance of some form loading.

Business Benefits

❑ Metastorm e-Work provides a flexible platform for MSB to glue together its individual applications and paper-based processes.

❑ High-level reports on process status and recent activity enable MSB to fine-tune its sales goals and ensure that it is focusing its sales resources on the most profitable markets.

❑ By defining, standardizing, and automating its processes via e-Work, MSB is able to easily and quickly meet its yearly independent auditing requirements. With both the process definition and the database logs, MSB can easily show exactly what was done, when it was done, and who did it.

❑ MSB has been able to ensure greater business continuity by migrating paper-based processes to electronic ones managed by e-Work. If a disaster occurred, MSB could simply fail-over to a redundant site (that's synchronized each night) where the sales and account management processes would continue without interruption.

❑ MSB has seen bottom-line savings from the elimination of wasteful processes and increased efficiency of the sales force to spend time selling, not chasing paper and talking.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson learned that MSB identified was the need for any process automation effort to be based on a platform that can adapt easily and quickly over time. If an automated process cannot adapt, it will separate further from the needs of the users in the organization, resulting in a less effective application, or one that's eventually ignored by the users. Change is the one constant in most businesses, and an application's ability to accommodate change will often be the key determining factor as to whether or not the application has long-term success.

MSB's experience also highlights the benefits that business process management can bring to an organization when used for an appropriate application. By using the BPM to define processes and formalize a standard way to visualize and manage them, MSB IT has been able to partner with departments to streamline existing processes.

Upside Analysis

Often the first time you truly understand something is when you've sat down to try to explain it to someone else. The very process of moving from an ad-hoc, person-driven project initiation process to a formalized one controlled by Metastorm required participants to articulate what they did and why, enabling MSB to reevaluate the requirements and process flow while streamlining it. MSB had to define the process using Metastorm's e-Work, create the appropriate flow of information from person to system to person, and ensure that all appropriate steps were completed. By articulating the formal business process within e-Work, and working with each department to formalize and automate it, MSB gained a significant advantage. It was able to both reduce the amount of time it took to complete the process (from an hour or more down to minutes), as well as increase efficiency and free up its sales people to work on new business. From this one solution, the business benefits, the workers benefit, and the stockholders benefit.

Upside Research sees MSB's experience as an example of what can go right when an organization attempts to manage business processes. While they haven't fundamentally changed their business, or dramatically altered what they do, MSB has achieved solid financial returns, increased efficiency, and greater productivity through business process management.

ABOUT UPSIDE RESEARCH

Upside Research is a research and consulting firm focused on helping clients put application development, Web services, business process management, integration, and enterprise infrastructure challenges in perspective. Upside Research helps organizations find practical ways to achieve their IT goals and profit from the diversity of a changing technology landscape.

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