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Advanced Business Solutions

Case Study

RAPRA Technology develops self service financial reporting with an extended finance solution from Advanced Business Solutions

Client: Rapra Technology

Sector: Commercial

Project: OpenAccounts

The decision by Rapra Technology, Europe's leading independent plastics and rubber consultancy, to implement a new e-enabled financial management solution, resulted in the creation of a self-service reporting culture and the more efficient use of staff resource across the business. On top of this, Rapra has achieved time and cost savings across a number of previously complex and time intensive financial administration processes, including a reduction in the time it takes to get an overall income figure by nearly 90%.

The process began in 2003 after Rapra emerged from the former Rubber and Plastics Research Association (RAPRA). Set up after the First World War to keep pace with rubber and plastic technology, Rapra now provides specialist plastics and rubber technical information and commercial services for the polymer industry and end-user industries. Split into two divisons, technology and information, Rapra operates a number of different business units including polymer analysis, testing, conference organising, training and book publishing.

rapra TECHNOLOGY

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- Steve Ankers, Management Accountant

Evaluation

Rapra's clients can commission individual services, specialist consultancy or participate in multi-client research projects. These projects are funded by EC and UK government and/or industry, to progress research and development of polymer technology and applications. Rapra runs 2,000 technical projects and helps 5,000 clients worldwide each year through 130 staff housed across two UK sites. The initial driver behind the adoption of a new financial solution was to help support these vast numbers of project users involved within the organisation.

Steve Ankers, management accountant for Rapra, explains how they selected a financial solution: *"To look at what was available in the marketplace we went to a Softworld exhibition at the NEC and it was here that we saw a presentation from Advanced Business Solutions. We were immediately impressed with Advanced Business Solutions' vision and understanding of our issues. Much of what they were offering was exactly what we had been saying we needed.*

Although we looked closely at two further solutions, OpenAccounts was preferred as it offered simplicity from a purchase ledger and sales ledger point of view and provided the level of functionality we needed in the project ledger. Also, because of OpenAccounts eFinance and eBIS functionality, it could give us the capability of providing access to collaborative financial information for employees across the organisation. However we did not realise at the time the extent to which we would come to use this functionality."

Implementation

Rapra started implementing OpenAccounts' core financial modules, eFinance and eBIS Exchange in September 2003 and went live a few months later, in January 2004. Rapra had previously operated with separate project, finance and store systems. This meant that the month end reporting was a laborious project as information from all three systems had to be brought together. Reconciling all the data caused lots of problems in terms of data compatibility and accuracy and it was almost impossible to a get a single, true version of Rapra's financial performance.

Once live, Rapra not only benefited from a consolidated view of the financial health of the company but was able to free up the IT staff that were charged with maintaining and supporting the previous in house bespoke financial solution. OpenAccounts Financials is an off the shelf solution, which needs very little post-implementation IT support.

Initially viewed as *'a nice to have add-on'*, the workflow and internet capabilities of OpenAccounts eBIS and eFinance solutions have now become the main focus of the system. Alongside the six-strong finance

team, middle managers throughout Rapra now have access to the enquiry part of the OpenAccounts system. Senior managers can also see the project ledger, providing them with a greater level of information to assist with performance management across the individual business units. A further 100 other Rapra employees also have access to the OpenAccounts system, enabling them to view and pull down reports from their work stations.

Steve Ankers continued: *"Initially we thought that it would be a case of us using the core financial modules extensively and maybe only using the eBIS and eFinance technology for certain processes. As it has turned out, we have become a major user with over 100 staff across Rapra using the technology for a variety of reasons and tasks. Each of our business units has a middle manager and a senior manager who make regular use of the functionality, and beneath this, there are consultants (scientists) who use the eBis side to run reports.*

The productivity gains from the introduction of a consolidated financial system and 'self service' reporting were immediate as it relieved all the pressure from our IT department; so much so that we were able to dissolve the department and redeploy staff to other areas of the business where they were needed more."

Cultural change

Rapra implemented a large cultural change programme to support and encourage this self-service working ethos. In particular, getting staff within Rapra not to automatically turn to the IT department to run various reports was an important challenge.

Responsible for the introduction of the OpenAccounts system into Rapra, Steve Ankers tackled the culture change needed through a re-education process. Training was set up throughout the organisation and easy-to-read guide books produced. Steve also worked with Advanced Business Solutions to customise the help notes within OpenAccounts eBIS and eFinance system so that they were relevant to each department/ business unit users. This proved to be the most valuable tool in the change process.

Major benefits

A further major benefit achieved since the introduction of OpenAccounts is that it used to take Rapra three or four days work to get an overall income figure. This is now done in one afternoon. Additionally, Rapra is now able to close both the sales and purchase ledgers on day one of the following month, something which was not previously possible.

Rapra has also streamlined its invoicing process. Previously, all the individual business units were doing their own invoicing but very few of the staff within each business were accounts trained. Now, through OpenAccounts, all employees need to do is fill out a simple invoice

request form online which gets automatically sent to the finance team to raise. Because invoicing has now been centralised, there are now very few errors and the whole process has been shortened.

Rapra now also utilises automated electronic project input forms. Prior to this, forms would be handwritten and then sent manually to credit control to approve. This would invariably take a couple of days before they came back which resulted in a delay in starting a project. Now that the system is automated, project managers can now book time and get invoice numbers directly and immediately.

The OpenAccounts system is also directly linked to the marketing database. This means that each time a new customer is added to the OpenAccounts system, the details are automatically fed into the marketing database. This ensures that Rapra can conduct very personalised direct mail campaigns and promotions.

Taste of success

Steve Ankers concludes: *"The biggest benefit to Rapra with the introduction of the OpenAccounts system is that employees now have the information at their fingertips to run their own projects. It is now easy to spot potential problems within projects and to pin point why projects are running over. Previously we were often left running projects without a full understanding of their status. We also now have complete control over the administration process, having automated and streamlined many of the main processes.*

This implementation has been so successful that we have been able to make more effective use of existing staff because of the cut down in the admin work load. The next steps will be to continue to further explore what the Advanced Business Solutions 'extended finance' solution product can do for our business."

About Business Solutions

Advanced Business Solutions, an Advanced Computer Software plc company, provides leading integrated business applications and services that enable public, private and third sector organisations to retain control, improve visibility and gain efficiencies whilst continually improving corporate performance. It's award-winning software systems comprise core financial management, procurement, human resource and payroll systems, integrated with a range of collaborative, document management and business intelligence solutions . It also provides managed and bureau service options.

Advanced Computer Software plc is the UK's leading supplier of software and IT services to the health, care and commercial sectors. It comprises 3 main divisions and has 7000 customers and 800 staff worldwide.

For more information

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