Meeting at the OASIS

by Toby Osborne

AN OASIS IS synonymous with paradise; and although those at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) are unlikely to go as far as describing their 'OASIS' financial materiel system as paradise, it is regarded as an asset.

Based on Oracle Financials 11.03, "we call it OASIS, and that stands for absolutely nothing," explained Steve Johnston, director of Administrative Services for INAC. "It is a very good system. I guess maybe some finance guy thought it was an oasis."

In government, procurement and finance are often kept separate, yet OASIS conveniently ties the two together. "When people go in to initiate purchases…etc. it's integrated into the financial system in terms of budget and accounts payable, etc, etc," said Johnston.

"We actually have five modules of the Oracle financial software: the general ledger, accounts payable, accounts receivable, the PO module – which is the purchasing module – and the fixed asset (FA) module," continued Johnston. "Now the government uses accrual accounting. That came into effect with the 2001/02 fiscal year, so it was necessary for us to upgrade our previous financial system and meet that requirement. And we took that time to also implement the new PO. … From my point of view – being responsible for procurement asset management – we took the opportunity to put in the PO and FA modules."

Tying procurement and finance together in a single system means transactions can be tracked with relative ease. "What you want is that 'cradle-to-grave' process," said Walter Draper, INAC's director of Financial Policy, Systems and Accounting, and chair of the Government of Canada Oracle Cluster Group. "So you can follow a transaction all the way – all the way from the procurement side through to the accounts payable, and then have it reflected in your financial statement."

INAC operates within a broad-based cluster group consisting principally of INAC, Fisheries and Oceans, Environment Canada, Transport Canada, Auditor General, Canadian Forces Housing Authority, and Correctional Service Canada.

Currently, INAC is moving to stage two, and implementing a fully Web-enabled version of the Oracle software, called '11i.' "We're working with two other departments to implement this Web-based version," said Johnston. "We're replicating our current capacities in a Web-enabled environment, which we can then leverage with additional functionality as we go forward. This gives us a richer application, of course, and given that we're going to be operating it on a single platform, we figure that, over time, we will realize significant cost reductions… you'll have one database instead of three databases, one server instead of three servers."

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Siwa Oasis, about 650 kms. west of Cairo, was once the most inaccessible oasis in Egypt, and believed to have been occupied since prehistoric times. It lies approximately 60 feet below sea level, has a population of about 23,000, and is famous for dates and olives. The fortress, Shali, was constructed of kharsif, a salt-impregnated mud that dries hard like cement but melts in downpours, such as the one in 1926. Siwa's history is full of stories including one about a visit from Alexander the Great to consult the Oracle of Amun following his conquest of Egypt.

functionality, and now INAC is "'kicking the tires' in terms of looking at how we operate versus what the current configuration of 11i is, so that we can figure out whether or not we need to do any tweaking or modifications," said Johnston. "We're trying to avoid customization because that's where the huge costs mount up – so from a functional perspective, people are looking at it to ensure that it meets our business process requirement. We're fairly confident that there's a high level of match there, and the system is quite flexible."

Furthermore, according to Johnston, the system is far better than things were four years ago. "Before we implemented the system, we had a contract management system that allowed us to track with a reasonable degree of accuracy our professional services and contract kind of expenditures for services… but, it was very sporadic – hit and miss. But now we can just go in and pull that information up through a report from OASIS."

Johnston's assistant, Mélissa Nolin, who handles Access to Information requests, says using OASIS is at least ten times easier because the information is all in one system. She is able to retrieve the required data within about thirty seconds – a vast improvement on a few years ago.

Draper noted, "In days of old, when we had a paper-based system, you'd have to say 'have you got that paper in front of you?' But now you can hit on essentially the same data at the same time, and as a procurement process goes through, you can just follow it from the time you fill out that initial purchase order request, all the way through till the final execution of the pay-

ment. And suppliers can access the transaction as well as the initiator… therefore; the parties involved in a transaction are looking at the same information at the same time."

Still, INAC is only one of a handful of departments to use Oracle software. "Most departments in government use SAP," noted Johnston. "In the enterprise resource planning (ERP) market space, SAP is the number one ERP, with the Oracle e-business suite in the number two position."

Nevertheless, INAC is contemplating further Oracle suite upgrades to support other applications within the department. "We're really pushing the ERP systems," continued Johnston. "So rather than build silo kind of systems, INAC is looking for opportunities where they can integrate these requirements into a single architecture – which ERP systems allow you to do.". ⋀⋀

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