

## MANAWATU DISTRICT COUNCIL

### NEW ZEALAND POST MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE AWARDS TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION

#### *“Project Automation”*

**Automation of reporting process to include alignment of the accounting system with the reporting requirements through to the production of published documents.**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The introduction of *Project Automation* at the Manawatu District Council has allowed an easy, cost-effective modification of the previous reporting process system. The time-saving for managers in gathering budget figures for their quarterly activity reports, and in quality control verification, through *Project Automation*, has been significant.

In its productive working relationship with in-house contractors, PC Training Solutions and Master Business Systems, the council has innovatively created a unique automated process that has improved the accuracy and efficiency of producing reports at the press of a button.

Now that *Project Automation* has been successfully introduced at the Quarterly Report level, it will be extended to encompass Annual Reports, Annual Plans and Long Term Council Community Plans.

Feedback for the new system has been overwhelmingly positive and underlines the decision to improve and enhance reporting procedures.

#### **1 The need for and expected benefits of the project and how it furthers the council's vision and strategic direction**

Council's Vision            To excel by achieving an effective and professional delivery of services supported by innovative leadership and a progressive attitude.

#### **The project furthers council's vision and strategic direction by:**

- Aligning the accounting system with the reporting process, the Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP), the Annual Plan, Annual Report and Quarterly Report
- Improving the financial analysis process by creating full drill down capability via the intranet to core financial statements (balance sheet, income statement and financial summaries) from the consolidated level right through to the transactional level
- Saving managers' time by eliminating the requirement to update financial data within their quarterly activity reports

- Minimising the time spent on quality control in verifying the accuracy and quality of the data:
  - Quality control enhanced as updates are made directly to the source data via the intranet avoiding consistency and integrity issues associated with maintaining multiple documents
  - Reporting at the source improves data integrity as all information is available in a single view via the intranet
- Improving the quality of reporting by managers:
  - Enabling activity managers and group managers to provide quality explanations relating to a financial variation
  - Enabling activity managers and group managers to provide quality explanations on progress of activities during the reporting period
  - Integration of financial and non-financial in a single view via the intranet enables managers to easily determine and analyse their financial performance and position
  - Full drill down capability via the intranet from the period level all the way to the transactional level thereby improving access to and the availability of financial data
- Minimising the effort required to consolidate the reporting data, eg year-to-date actuals, full year budget figures and non-financial data for Annual Plan, Quarterly Reports and LTCCP

## **2 Effective project management techniques**

### **2.1 Time management**

- Discussions between the Project team and contractors on timeframes produced an agreed and workable deliverable date

### **2.2 Scope and communication management**

- Initial project objectives including project scope were defined and agreed upon
- Meetings between various parties, eg Chief Financial Officer, Strategic Planning staff, IT Manager and software training contractors to identify existing procedures and user needs together with providing quality checks
- As a result of the knowledge of and the relationship with the contracting parties, the scope of project widened to assist the Council in achieving its major reporting requirements, eg going further than the automation of the Quarterly Report to automating both the Annual Plan and the LTCCP

### **2.3 Procurement management**

- Enhancement of existing systems, eg intranet, Microsoft Word, Excel, AFID (in-house developed reporting tool)
  - Creation of web-based tools that present relevant data from the accounting system with rules based security to ensure data integrity
  - Intranet-based mechanism operating directly against the accounting database with no word processing intermediary steps
  - Development of document assembly tools using Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) and templates

## 2.4 Quality management

- Progress status easily available to activity managers, group managers and strategic planners who have responsibility for reports
- To meet staff needs to focus on the data instead of the layout
- Improved quality assurance
  - Reporting and commenting at the source
  - Via the intranet, managers can see outstanding items using rules based security and cannot sign off until all items are completed
- Template-based documents ensures consistency and adherence to organisational style guide
- Automation of each process through the use of existing technology
- Ease of assembling the final report using VBA and template-based document assembly

## 2.5 Risk management

- Established a contingency plan that identified possible risks and risk responses

## 3 A participatory approach to communicating with and getting 'buy-in' from stakeholders associated with the project.

As a result of communicating with various stakeholders, the following needs were identified and captured within *Project Automation*:

**Financial management:** to automate the insertion of year-to-date actual and full year budget figures into group activity reports

**Activity managers:** to provide a one-stop system via the intranet without the need to seek financial data from other sources or create various word processing documents to record their findings

**Group managers:** to monitor more easily the quality of information being included in reports

**Strategic planners:** to monitor the progress of activity and group managers to meet the deadlines for the production of Quarterly Reports, Annual Plans and LTCCPs

**Secretariat staff:** to simplify the task of assembling and publishing Quarterly Reports, Annual Plans and LTCCPs

**Council:** to gain greater leverage from its intranet and greater value from its documentation

Once the *Project Automation* was completed the following forms of communication took place to ensure continued buy-in to the project:

- Presentation to corporate management team (1-3<sup>rd</sup> tier managers)
- Provision of group training on the system
- Strategic planning one-on-one training sessions with activity managers
- Asked for comments from activity and group managers as to performance of the automation
- Sought comment from Council members as to the presentation of the report produced using the new automation project
- Debrief with project team and contractors

#### **4 Innovation and originality in the specific award category area.**

Drawing on existing systems we have innovatively created a unique cost effective automated process that has improved the accuracy and efficiency of producing reports at the press of a button.

The initial project was to provide an automated process to include financial data in quarterly activity reports but after further consideration the project was extended to include:

- Creating a facility on the intranet for activity managers and group managers to record explanations and comments for inclusion in Quarterly Reports
- Populating the achievement information for activities identified in the Annual Plan
- Populating the comments and explanations of non-financial data automatically
- Making provision in the financial reporting database for storage of both financial and non-financial data
- Designing a Microsoft Word template with VBA routines that could be used to assemble group activity reports with data from both the identified achievement information and the financial reporting database
- Designing a Microsoft Word template with VBA routines that could be used to assemble financial data extracted from spreadsheets and group activity documents into a single Quarterly Report document
- Repeating this entire process to produce the Annual Plan and the LTCCP

What was required?

- Modifications to the accounting system to enable automation of display for both financial and non-financial data
- Development of intranet-based documentation to comment on and respond to both financial and non-financial data
- Development of intranet-based facility for strategic planning team to monitor tasks performed by both activity managers and group managers in the preparation of data for reports
- Automation of the production of activity and financial statements using VBA and template-based documentation
- Automation of the production of Quarterly Report using VBA and template-based document assembly

#### **5 Successful results, in both financial and non-financial terms**

##### **Financial**

- Cost effective
- System based on innovative use and enhancement of existing systems

##### **Non-Financial**

- Increased confidence by managers in the quality of information and detail in final report
- Getting a kick out of the automation of the document production
- Ease of making changes and regenerating the report (in a matter of seconds)

- Ease of audit process – internal and external auditors have found the new system easier in relation to tracking invoices through the intranet

## 6 That the project was a 'good, sensible and right thing to do'

To demonstrate that the project was a good, sensible and right thing to do managers were approached for comment; here's what they had to say

- **Rod Titcombe, Chief Executive:**

*"I fully support and endorse Project Automation. It has enhanced our existing systems, further reduced the risk of error and led to greater efficiencies in reporting requirements. An excellent, user friendly process that assists my team to easily produce quality reports."*

- **Lorraine Vincent, Community Services Group Manager:**

*"Computer systems have an uncanny ability to cause my arms to tangle, my eyes to cross and my brain to fog. We are just not compatible...."*

*.....or at least that was the case until Project Automation arrived! Now I'm coordinated, confident and computer savvy. The AQRS is simple and makes Quarterly Reporting easy-peasy. Who mentioned incompatibility?"*

- **Richard Kirby, Assets Group Manager:**

*"Project Automation has been a great innovation in that it has saved time and enhanced efficiency. All the information we are reporting against is available on the template and can be amended electronically without duplication. Those responsible for reporting against the various objectives are clearly identified and this also improves effectiveness and efficiency. This is a very useful enhancement and one that will remove many of the time consuming 'hassles' normally associated with reporting."*

- **Wayne Spencer, Water Manager:**

*"Great, easy to use, innovative improvement on the past. Saves heaps of time and is 100% reliable as information is taken directly from the data source. I am advertising our system to other Councils."*

- **Tracey Hunt, Community and Strategic Development Officer:**

*"As Council Officers presenting to Councillors and the public it was reassuring and satisfying to know that the information and data included in the Quarterly Report was the best we could make it; precise, relevant and well presented."*

- **Janine Hawthorn, Secretariat Manager:**

*"The pulling together of 29 individual activity reports into one Quarterly Report in seven seconds – who could deny that this wasn't a good, sensible and right thing to do."*

- **Craig McLean, Chief Financial Officer:**

*"In the immortal words of John Travolta this new process is:*

*Automatic*

*It's systematic*

*It's hyyyyydromatic*

*Why it's GREASE LIGHTNING!"*