

RSM! McGladrey

Services Firm Switches to Microsoft Collaboration, Cuts Costs and Improves Productivity

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Professional Services

Customer Profile

Headquartered in Bloomington, Minnesota, RSM McGladrey is one of the world's largest providers of financially focused business services, with more than 600 offices in 70 countries.

Business Situation

The company's aging IT infrastructure was not keeping up with a growing mobile work force. Employee communication and collaboration suffered, and internal IBM Lotus Notes applications were difficult to use.

Solution

RSM McGladrey began migrating to a standardized solution based on tightly integrated Microsoft® collaboration products, which replaced IBM Lotus Notes/Domino and related Notes applications.

Benefits

- More centralized, flexible IT infrastructure
- Better employee collaboration from more usable applications
- More productive workers
- Support for a happier mobile work force

“We can serve more clients and provide more services with the same resources. By recovering tens of thousands of labor hours, we will save millions of dollars annually.”

Mike Cleary, Director of Strategic Technology, RSM McGladrey

A wholly owned subsidiary of H&R Block, RSM McGladrey is a major consulting firm that offers financial and business services to mid-sized companies. After years of growth, the company's aging IT infrastructure was ill-suited to its mobile in-the-field work force. Communication and collaboration products, based primarily on IBM Lotus Notes/Domino, were cumbersome, and employee productivity suffered. In late 2005, RSM McGladrey switched to a collaboration solution based on integrated Microsoft® products. The company also began migrating its Notes applications to Microsoft technologies, including the Microsoft .NET Framework. Now, the more centralized IT infrastructure is simpler to manage and supports flexible application development. Employees collaborate effectively through applications that are easier to use, resulting in higher productivity and saving the company millions of dollars.

Situation

RSM McGladrey provides midsize companies with financially focused business services. Offerings include tax consulting, wealth management, retirement resources, accounting, risk management, payroll services, and strategic planning.

Headquartered in Bloomington, Minnesota, RSM McGladrey serves global customers through its membership in RSM International, an affiliation of separate and independent legal entities. Audit and attest services are provided through an alternative practice structure with McGladrey & Pullen LLP, a partner-owned CPA firm. Considered together, these companies are a major provider of business consulting, with more than 600 offices in 70 countries. RSM McGladrey has more than 7,000 employees and is a wholly owned subsidiary of H&R Block.

In late 2004, after years of success and expansion, RSM McGladrey became concerned about its aging, heterogeneous IT infrastructure. In particular, the communication and collaboration solutions, based primarily on IBM Lotus Notes/Domino and Notes applications, could not be adapted to the company's larger and increasingly mobile work force. "Lotus Notes/Domino served our company well for many years," says Joe Topinka, Chief Information Officer at RSM McGladrey. "But Notes had reached a point in its product life cycle where we needed to revisit the role it should play in our systems."

RSM McGladrey used Notes applications for a variety of tasks, most critically for complex engagement management (auditing, including audit work papers; trial balance; and supporting documentation). But even simple everyday tasks had become cumbersome in the Notes environment. For example, employee contact information was stored on multiple, incompatible systems.

"There was no unified up-to-date corporate phonebook online, anywhere," says Mike Cleary, Director of Strategic Technology at RSM McGladrey. "If people were not in your local office, or if you didn't have their numbers written on your own phone list, finding them could be a challenge. It was especially hard for new employees."

Collaboration in the field was also a problem. Nearly 85 percent of RSM McGladrey employees are mobile most of the time—out providing customers with tax, consulting, and audit services. "Traveling professional-services representatives had only about a 50/50 chance of connecting to our office," says Cleary. "It was a serious problem. These employees need to collaborate with each other and to access data back in the office."

In-the-field difficulties included customers who did not have compatible networks, who did not have or authorize Internet connections, and whose firewalls blocked connections. As a workaround, many RSM McGladrey representatives set up their own networks either at customer sites or in hotel rooms. "Considering that our field reps are not IT administrators, it worked surprisingly well," adds Cleary. "But making them carry the extra equipment, including notebooks loaded with Notes/Domino, was a lot of trouble. And since Notes setup is very complicated, it often consumed a lot of time that they could have used much more productively."

In January 2005, the IT department of RSM McGladrey began conducting field studies, observing the company's professional-services staff and how the staff used technology, particularly Notes and Notes applications, in day-to-day work. "It became clear to us that we needed to create more of a sense of community among employees," says Topinka. "And it was just as clear that

our existing technology would not accomplish that goal.”

The research revealed that usability was a particular problem. “RSM McGladrey believes very strongly in the usability of the products and internal applications that employees work with,” says Cleary. “Making sure that the applications present consistent, easy-to-understand, and efficient interfaces is very important. Our attitude is, ‘If you can do it in one click, don’t make the user click three times.’ Notes/Domino wasn’t giving us the usability we wanted.”

For internal applications that connect to or enhance its communication and collaboration solutions, RSM McGladrey wanted to move toward flexible and friendly Web-based interfaces and software delivery. However, the company’s existing Notes/Domino implementation didn’t readily support extensive Web-based deployment. “Notes helped make us the successful company we are today,” adds Cleary. “However, its development features were not scalable or flexible enough for what we wanted to do.”

Concurrent with the field studies, RSM McGladrey spent several months examining alternative products. The company considered and rejected the newest release of Notes/Domino. “We determined that an environment based on Notes/Domino would become increasingly complex over time,” says Cleary. “That’s not the direction we wanted to go. We wanted to simplify our infrastructure, not make it even more difficult and expensive to maintain.”

Solution

By June 2005, RSM McGladrey had completed its research and had defined a next-generation IT architecture based on Microsoft® products. In July, it invited Microsoft Services consultants to examine the company’s current IT systems and the proposed improvements. Working together,

the two companies identified the specific components that would be needed to make the improvements work. They also developed a deployment schedule that was aggressive enough to accommodate an upcoming corporate merger.

RSM McGladrey selected the following tightly integrated Microsoft products and technologies as part of a new collaboration solution:

Infrastructure Components

- The Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system, the foundation of Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software
- Active Directory® service, a component of Windows Server 2003 that provides a central location for managing and securing user accounts, computers, and applications
- Microsoft SQL Server™ 2005, a highly scalable relational database with extensive management and development tools, easy-to-use business intelligence, and analysis and reporting services
- Microsoft Identity Integration Server (MIIS) 2003, a centralized service that stores and integrates identity information for organizations with multiple directories
- Microsoft Internet Security and Acceleration (ISA) Server 2004, an application-layer firewall, a virtual private network (VPN), and Web cache solution

Communication and Collaboration Components

- Microsoft Windows® SharePoint® Services, technology in Windows Server 2003 that provides Web hosting and document storage functions and can function as a development platform for creating collaboration applications
- Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal Server 2003, an enterprise collaboration solution that: aggregates SharePoint sites,

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documents, and applications into a single, easy-to-use portal; and complements Windows SharePoint Services by adding functions for navigation, searching, integration, and personalization

- Microsoft Exchange Server 2003, a communication server that enables companies to send and receive electronic mail and other communications
- Microsoft Office Live Meeting, a hosted Web conferencing service that enables real-time collaboration

End-User Client Components

- Microsoft Office Professional Edition 2003, which includes the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2003 messaging and collaboration client, for individual computer users
- Microsoft Office Outlook Web Access, an integrated component of Exchange Server 2003 that accesses e-mail, schedules, and other information stored on Exchange Server using only a Web browser and an Internet or intranet connection

Additional Development Components

- The Microsoft .NET Framework, an integral component of the Windows operating system that provides a programming model and runtime for Web services, Web applications, and smart client applications
- Microsoft Visual Studio® .NET 2005 development system
- Microsoft Visual Studio 2005 Team Suite
- Microsoft Office InfoPath® 2003 information-gathering program

Migration Schedule

In mid-August, RSM McGladrey approved the solution's components and deployment schedule. The first six-week phase would start right away and end on Sunday, October 2. On that date, the messaging system of a 2,000-employee company that RSM McGladrey was about to acquire would be switched from Lotus Notes to Exchange

Server 2003. (On Monday morning, October 3, that company would officially become part of RSM McGladrey.) In the second six-week phase, RSM McGladrey would migrate its other 5,000 employees to Exchange Server and deploy additional collaboration components. Finally, proceeding into 2006, RSM McGladrey would begin the process of replacing its Notes applications with more usable applications based on Microsoft technologies.

Phase 1: Migrating the Newly Acquired Company

RSM McGladrey prepared for the first phase of the plan by using Common Migration Tool (CMT), a product developed by Binary Tree. CMT migrates users' e-mail, calendars, tasks, and personal address books from Lotus Notes to Exchange Server. CMT presents a smooth, easy-to-use interface that requires no end-user interaction.

Also during this period, RSM McGladrey used Active Directory as the basis of a unified contact directory of new employees. The company also used MIIS to create user accounts and define their permissions. Together with Active Directory, MIIS became the basis of an automated account provisioning and de-provisioning tool for creating user accounts when employees are hired, adjusting permissions as employees move from one job to another and closing accounts when employees leave. Since RSM McGladrey planned to keep Notes applications running for an 18-month transitional period after the migration, MIIS was also used to manage the required Notes accounts.

Over the weekend of October 1 and 2, RSM McGladrey transferred more than 2,000 Notes mailboxes. “It was a remarkable feat,” says Cleary. “It cost us a lot of sleep to get the job done that fast, but with that phase successfully behind us, we knew we'd be able

to more smoothly migrate our remaining 5,000 employees.”

Phase 2: Moving the Whole Company to the New Solution

For the next six weeks, RSM McGladrey prepared for and deployed the second phase of the plan. Employees did not experience any serious disruption in service. “CMT and Exchange Server performed admirably in our November conversion,” says Cleary.

With Exchange Server up and running, RSM McGladrey was ready to address its mobile and remote employees’ needs for document sharing and shared Web spaces, so the company deployed SharePoint Products and Technologies more widely. (Select departments had already been using them.) The company established SharePoint departmental and companywide sites and launched a corporate intranet. By combining the collaboration features of Windows SharePoint Services with the aggregation and integration features of SharePoint Portal Server 2003, the company created a powerful and flexible enterprisewide collaboration resource. Windows SharePoint Services also supported collaborative workflow and many other applications that IT administrators would start developing in phase 3.

Phase 3: Ongoing Development and Customization

RSM McGladrey had been using hundreds of Notes applications for tasks such as ordering office supplies, requesting computer equipment, and filing Help Desk remedy tickets. More complex applications managed the company’s Human Resources files and continuing education programs. The most critical and complex applications, those for engagement management, encompassed about 40,000 Notes databases and were distributed among six server computers. Earlier, RSM McGladrey had extensively

inventoried and analyzed all these applications using Microsoft Application Analyzer for Lotus Notes and other tools. Now, it began refining that analysis, dividing the applications into categories based on complexity, the type of migration work that each would require, and scheduling development resources for them. This phase is ongoing.

RSM McGladrey chose Windows SharePoint Services, with its extensive support for Web parts, to replace collaborative Notes applications and to support new ones. The company chose the .NET Framework to develop Web services and smart clients. Specifically, several Notes databases had been supporting crude, localized, intranet-like sites, and the company consolidated them into its new Windows SharePoint Services-based corporate intranet. RSM McGladrey also began redesigning its critical engagement-management systems, transforming them into .NET-connected applications. And the company used smart client technology to implement a consistent, easy-to-use, time-and-expense application, one that serves employees whether they’re connected to the network or working offline. Additionally, it replaced several Notes-based form applications with InfoPath forms. The latter gathers data in XML format and exports it seamlessly to other XML-compatible systems, thereby further simplifying the company’s integration efforts.

For its development system, the company chose Visual Studio .NET 2005 and Visual Studio Team Suite Edition. Together, these components form a strong development foundation with robust tools for creating complex applications. “We absolutely want to move our development work to the .NET Framework,” says Cleary. “It works beautifully with Exchange Server and Windows SharePoint Services. Our analysis in July told us these products could successfully replace

everything we used Notes for. We knew some apps would be easy and some would be tough, but we've confirmed our belief that we could do the migration."

More Collaboration and Mobility Deployments

RSM McGladrey deployed Live Meeting—already used in many departments—more widely to encourage interoffice meetings and conferences and to cut down on travel costs. The company also used Live Meeting to conduct webcasts that provided training for the new collaboration solution.

For individual workstations, RSM McGladrey deployed Office Professional Edition 2003 enterprisewide. For mobile workers, the company activated the Outlook Web Access feature in Exchange Server so that they could access e-mail and schedules on the road. RSM McGladrey also complemented the mobility features in Exchange Server with a secure socket layer VPN, using ISA Server 2004.

Benefits

Because the new solution is standardized on tightly integrated Microsoft products and technologies, RSM McGladrey employees now communicate and collaborate more effectively. The company's IT department also has the flexibility to develop applications that are easier to use. As a result, all workers—especially the 85 percent of employees who are mobile—spend less time making technology work and more time using it to get real work done. These productivity gains improve morale and reduce operational costs by millions of dollars annually.

A More Centralized and Flexible IT Infrastructure

With the new collaboration solution in place, the IT infrastructure of RSM McGladrey is more centralized and easier to manage because it's based on standardized and

integrated components. "We are both more streamlined and more secure," says Cleary. "Having a centralized structure has made us rethink how we administer tasks." For example, Active Directory supports delegating functions, responsibilities, and permissions according to precise rules that administrators can define. Office-level administration can be distributed among hundreds of offices, which frees the IT department's resources for more pressing duties. However, the IT department still maintains its high-level control and security policies.

Another example of more efficient IT management is the automated account provisioning and de-provisioning system. "There is a very high turnover in the business-consulting industry," says Cleary. "As RSM McGladrey grows from 7,000 employees to 10,000 or 20,000 someday, we want a solution that's scalable. Obviously, asking IT administrators to spend their time managing hundreds of user-account changes isn't scalable."

Plus, because the solution includes robust application-development components, IT administrators can adapt applications to the company's changing needs, and they can develop new applications tailored directly to what employees do. "The Notes/Domino environment was restrictive," says Cleary. "But the Microsoft collaboration solution is more usable and offers a more flexible development environment where we can create user-friendly applications, especially for our mobile work force. That was the main reason that drove our decision to switch."

The collaboration solution not only supports application development but also efficient deployment. "When we administrators step back and look at how we do development and how we roll out applications to employees now, versus how we did it before, it's really encouraging," says Cleary. "New functionality

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Joe Topinka, Chief Information Officer, RSM McGladrey

is so well-integrated that employees often don’t notice what we’ve changed; they just know their applications work better.”

Better Employee Collaboration from More Usable Applications

Collaboration tasks—from sending e-mail to sharing documents—are now easier, so employees engage in them more often and with better results. “We are absolutely seeing more effective collaboration as a result of the Microsoft technologies,” says Cleary. “For our employees, the Notes client seemed counterintuitive in many ways. In terms of user interface, now that we’ve switched, we are seeing improved employee morale and less frustration.”

The new solution’s ease of use is evident in the lack of training it requires. RSM McGladrey set up a SharePoint training site, purchased training materials from Microsoft, and scheduled training webcasts in Live Meeting, but many of these resources have gone unused. “We were prepared with extensive materials,” says Topinka. “But we didn’t need them. The Microsoft collaboration solution has been really easy for our people to learn. A less technical colleague of mine, who did not grow up with computers and had never used the new Microsoft products, said to me, ‘I’ve been a Notes user for years, and I didn’t need any training on this Microsoft system. I picked it up in nothing flat!’”

“We canceled most of the webcasts,” adds Cleary. “With nothing more than a simple cheat sheet, most employees carried on their day-to-day business after the migration without any interruption.”

Usability is also evident in the applications that RSM McGladrey can now develop.

“Windows SharePoint Services is proving to be a very powerful and useful technology,” says Cleary. “There are numerous business needs that we were never able to address using Notes because we didn’t feel it was an

appropriate environment to develop workflow applications in. A lot of our reluctance had to do with being unable to access information in other client applications. Now, we can expose that client information and display it using Web parts, for example.”

More Productive Workers

RSM McGladrey believes that usability leads directly to productivity. “Not only will the Microsoft collaboration solution accomplish the same tasks as Notes, but we believe it adds value by providing easier, friendlier employee experiences that lead to increased productivity,” explains Cleary.

For example, the unified directory of contacts and accounts, supported by Active Directory and MIIS, makes contacting and collaborating with colleagues much easier. “Now, when you get an e-mail in Outlook, you can right-click on the person’s name and look up the phone number,” says Topinka. “I’ve heard so many comments about that simple benefit. People love it.”

“It’s a little thing, but that example with Outlook demonstrates the tight integration between Office 2003 and the rest of the collaboration solution,” adds Cleary.

“Similarly, I can edit a document in Word and then share it through Windows SharePoint Services or e-mail it through Outlook immediately. It’s hard to quantify benefits like these—how much time employees save or how much money the company no longer wastes—but they certainly have put a lot of smiles on people’s faces. The new solution fosters better morale by making it easier for employees to find information they need and find it more quickly.”

These productivity benefits extend across corporate boundaries. “I have a lot of meetings with peers at H&R Block and at other companies in the family of our parent company,” says Topinka. “Now, when they

send appointments to me, I can directly accept them, and they show up on my calendar. It's a whole lot more efficient than playing phone tag."

Also, because the centralized platform is easier to manage, IT administrators are using their time more efficiently, doing more things than they could do before. "They're able to distribute their time across other projects that would have otherwise required hiring more workers," says Cleary.

Support for a Happier Mobile Work Force

The majority of RSM McGladrey employees are mobile, and the new collaboration solution has been designed with them in mind. "The mobility features in the Microsoft products are considerably beyond those found in Notes, which makes the products much more usable for our mobile work force," says Cleary. For example, by accessing Exchange Server and particularly SharePoint Portal Server, customer engagement representatives in the field can share documents with each other without having to set up mobile peer-to-peer networks. "Now, they're not going to have to carry around all that extra networking and server equipment," adds Cleary. "They won't have to understand the nuances of setting up a network environment just to do their jobs."

Other mobility benefits are closely related to the usability of everyday applications. "The Outlook Web Access client looks remarkably similar to the full Outlook client, so it's easy for our employees to switch between the two," says Topinka. "The ability to send e-mail, schedule meetings, consult calendars, and edit shared documents at any time, anywhere, on any computer, has been a huge benefit to the company."

"We are concerned about our employees' well-being," adds Cleary. "We anticipate a

very big payback in terms of the increased amount of work our representative can accomplish while out in the field, onsite, with customers. And with the new collaboration solution, we want to give them back some of the work-life balance time they previously had to give up, time they spent becoming technology experts instead of doing their day-to-day jobs."

Millions of Dollars in Reduced Costs

The new collaboration solution offers huge savings to RSM McGladrey in four key areas. First, it requires less-expensive development resources. "It's a supply and demand issue," says Topinka. "Notes developers are increasingly hard to find and therefore increasingly expensive."

Overall development costs are also significantly reduced. Cleary adds, "We are finding that most applications created using the new solution, and particularly those based on the .NET Framework, are taking less time to build; we are able to include many more usability features, and they require less training and support. As a result, the cost of deploying applications is now about 25 percent lower compared with our Notes/Domino environment."

Second, RSM McGladrey conservatively estimates that the new easier-to-use solution offers a savings of 10 minutes a day for each employee who performs audit services. "We can serve more clients and provide more services with the same resources," says Cleary. "By recovering tens of thousands of labor hours, we will save millions of dollars annually."

Third, expanding on the benefit of a more centralized and flexible IT infrastructure, RSM McGladrey expects its new systems will be not only simpler but also less expensive to manage. "By eliminating the Domino field [which are key Notes/Domino infrastructure

components] in favor of the new infrastructure, we anticipate cost saving in the tens of thousands of dollars annually,” says Cleary. “This is due to reduced management resources and a reduced need for technology support.”

Fourth, the new solution also uses storage and server computer hardware more efficiently, which further reduces maintenance costs. For example, because Notes provided no method to directly encourage individual users to clean out their mailboxes, storage requirements could fluctuate dramatically from month to month. “Managing user storage space was a pretty labor-intensive process in Notes,” explains Cleary. “Now, storage management is easier.” Specifically, the solution’s robust support for enterprise storage area networks makes it easy for IT administrators to define storage limits for each user. Because this storage method is so scalable, RSM McGladrey can avoid future hardware expenses. “Our new environment currently supports 7,000 users,” adds Cleary. “We believe that number can easily double without our having to buy additional storage hardware.”

Opportunities for Future Improvements

With key solution components now in place, RSM McGladrey looks forward to building on them and expanding the solution’s scope in the future. For example, the company is standardizing on Microsoft Windows Mobile® 5.0 for its mobile devices, and it will produce a Windows Mobile 5.0–based version of its time-and-expense application, providing mobile employees with quick access to those basic functions. In anticipation of these improvements, RSM McGladrey is already preparing to deploy Exchange Server 2003 with Service Pack 2, given its improved support for mobile devices.

Additionally, having successfully deployed several .NET-connected applications, RSM McGladrey will develop dozens more in the coming months. Also over the next few months, the company plans to explore the instant messaging capabilities of Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2003.

“Everything is so well-integrated now. Employees can communicate in so many different ways,” concludes Cleary. “We were a Notes shop for 10 years, and practically overnight we switched people to a completely new system. People generally don’t like to change things that they’re used to, so I wondered if I would be able to walk the halls without fearing for my life. Instead, people stop me to express their gratitude. For an IT person like me, that’s the best measure of the new solution’s success.”

For More Information

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