Case Study

M-Files Improves Inter-office Cooperation at UNEP

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) eliminates paper files, shares legal records across borders, and automates procedures with M-Files document management

Osmany Pereira Gonzalez heads the joint services of Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions in Geneva, Switzerland for the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The office is one of several United Nations (UN) locations that assist in implementing three multilateral treaties on hazardous materials. Each legal instrument covers different aspects of international chemical production, use, trade, and disposal.

Most of its mission, Pereira says, is informational. His office delivers the appropriate technical and legal details to governments and corporations seeking compliance. "When countries commit to a legally binding agreement, information becomes a valuable tool," says Pereira. "A lot of our work is ensuring that the proper information gets to the right people at the right time, which is why information technology is so central to our success."

The Situation

The Geneva Joint Services office was established shortly after the Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions became active. Although tasked with a new mission, the office inherited technical and business processes from its parent UN organization. The new department was resourced with Windows-based PCs and servers using Microsoft's .NET Framework, but it still relied heavily on paper file systems.

"The bulk of the United Nations has been slow to adopt new technologies," he explains. "At the start, we had a lot of the processes that were still stuck in the 1960s, when they wrote letters and memos on typewriters."

Pereira and his staff recognized the inefficiencies of paper files and foresaw the difficulty in fulfilling its global mission using outdated methods. Sharing documentation among other UN locations seemed cumbersome.

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For example, the office shared paper records with the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) based in Rome, Italy. Each time one office received a new document, it would send a fax to the other, indicating what items were added to the collective archives.

Pereira and the head of IT, Federico Izzo, envisioned a system where employees could not only store, retrieve, and easily share all legal and technical content digitally, but could also track step-by-step procedures with workflow tools.

"With only 70 employees, we have a relatively small office," says Pereira, "but we have to serve the whole world – all regions and all conventions. We felt the office needed the capabilities that you find in an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. We needed good systems to manage our documents, contacts, and networks while also effectively tracking our correspondence for official communications between the Secretariat and all participating nations."

The Solution

The Geneva office of the United Nations Environment Programme implemented a document management solution called M-Files.

In a multi-user environment, M-Files software runs on both client computers as well as the server. Individual users can access the M-Files Vault – a centralized repository of all documents in the organization – much like they would a removable drive. Rather than storing digital files loosely defined in folders and subfolders, M-Files structures every document within a searchable database organized and indexed with user-definable tags or properties, also known as metadata.

"We decided to make an essential archive of our documents in M-Files and to use the indexing and notification features of M-Files to facilitate our day-today work," says Pereira, who found the digital file solution very affordable to implement while providing all the essential features:

- **Simple metadata indexing of files:** The indexing method behind M-Files is easy to understand. In lieu of saving files in folder locations, a user 'tags' a document with descriptive key words or category names. The document can later be quickly retrieved by searching on any of these terms.

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- **High-volume imaging:** The office could easily convert old paper records into a fully indexed, searchable digital archive. M-Files can import digital scans in large quantities, assigning appropriate metadata key terms to stacks of related documents. M-Files also automatically indexes incoming faxes and e-mails.
- **Full integration with Windows:** Rather than a separate application or software program with a new user interface to learn, M-Files is deeply integrated into Windows Explorer and it can be accessed through the standard open/save commands of all Windows applications, just like a typical hard drive on the user's PC. The familiar interface eased the staff's gradual transition to paperless processes.
- **Remote access:** UN workers in Rotterdam Convention offices in Rome also installed M-Files, allowing them to search and retrieve items in the archives in Geneva.
- **Workflow:** A combination of special keyword tags, Microsoft Word templates, and M-Files automatic e-mail notifications, creates a simple but highly effective workflow structure that is easily customizable for any recurring task.

For example, when a notification comes from a party to the Convention, nominating their Official Contact Point, the notification is first entered in a template form and saved in M-Files, and then the system automatically e-mails a notice to the staff lawyer for identity verification. Once approved, the save command triggers another e-mail request to data entry personnel, who then add the nominee as an official contact into the database. "M-Files reminds us of the steps in each process, and keeps the process on track and moving forward."

The Benefits

He sees M-Files as ideal for public sector offices that need to improve the way they manage documents and processes, but need to do so gradually – and inexpensively – without interruption in normal activities.

The leadership of the United Nations has announced plans to implement an overarching document management system in a top-down implementation, although this ambitious plan will take some time to complete. In the meantime, Pereira is glad that the three Convention Secretariats have found a solution like M-Files to help them improve their digital filing and document management processes now.

"Under the auspices of this particular project, we have created a kind of UN office prototype with M-Files," says Pereira Other UN locations without electronic document management in place have become very interested in what we've done, and many are currently looking into whether they will buy M-Files and adopt this management system for themselves."

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