Although small local governments are under pressure to modernize operations, the budgets and resources needed to do so are often out of reach. St. Croix County, Wisc., is one of many organizations pursuing a strategy to rapidly bring their financial and human resource (HR) systems up to speed, deliver new services and prepare for the future, all by using applications powered by cloud computing.

Like many smaller entities, St. Croix County (population 89,000) is working to meet the rising expectations of citizens who look to their local government to provide the same convenient, innovative digital services as a private company — whether that’s using a computer or smartphone to pay property taxes, obtain a license, report potholes, check on the status of a contract bid or do other city business. Citizens also want financial transparency so they can see how their tax money is being spent.

A popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts, St. Croix County is also an attractive location for residents who may work in the nearby Minneapolis/St. Paul hub but crave a more affordable, suburban lifestyle. Similar to their big city counterparts, leaders in such counties and smaller towns recognize the potential of smart city implementations to streamline operations, deliver innovative services and generate revenue from the data they collect.

St. Croix County implemented cloud-native Oracle Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Human Capital Management (HCM) services to integrate data across the organization and change the way that every department does business. In doing so, the county has laid a foundation for modernization. Central to its implementation success is Oracle Platinum partner CherryRoad Technologies, a full-service consulting firm with more than 30 years of experience in modernizing, optimizing and managing complex back-office processes and technologies for the public sector.

Mobile procurement is just one example of the solution’s impact. For instance, when social workers conduct in-home or facility visits, they no longer need to come back to the office to order supplies for their client. In addition, information about vendors and other services is at their fingertips. The same is true for parks and facilities workers, highway crews and others in the field who can now order parts from the job site.

On the HR side, employees can submit their time cards electronically, and managers can approve expense reports and handle other HR-related tasks from their mobile devices.

STANDING STILL IS NOT AN OPTION

St. Croix faced challenges familiar to many government leaders. Before adopting Oracle’s cloud-native services, the county used a legacy financial system with limited functionality.

Data came from disparate databases, spreadsheets and other sources, and had to be gathered and entered manually into the finance system. The process was time consuming and unwieldy, which hindered reporting and limited transparency as well as the timely delivery of important information to citizens and business decision-makers. It was not unusual for project management teams to be weeks behind in knowing how much money had been spent on a project. When citizens needed information, they would have to come into the government center, file a public records request and wait for the small office staff to fulfill the request. Another persistent problem was keeping the system updated — never mind modernizing it.

County leaders knew they could not meet stakeholders’ needs without up-to-date technology. They realized that with the old system, standing still was not an option, as it was impossible to catch up with advances in technology.

SELF-SERVICE FOR EVERY DEPARTMENT

St. Croix County leaders wanted a cloud-native solution that would allow them to capture data more efficiently. The county needed to start fresh with a system that integrated everything, was easily accessible and had every employee working on the same system. And, of course, the solution needed to fit within the county’s tight budget.

With Oracle’s cloud-native ERP and HR services, staff can access data and programs from anywhere. Moreover, staff can avail themselves of the industry-standard workflow built into the system, ensuring painless future upgrades.

Prior to modernization, the county was not able to encumber funding because it lacked a purchase order system. Through Oracle’s procurement functions, budgetary and purchasing controls are built into the workflow. When an employee makes a
The smaller scale of St. Croix County was ideal for a cloud-based solution.

"Five years ago, St. Croix would have purchased a Tier 3 system that would not be able to change with its needs," says Lange. "Today, cloud can revolutionize the way local government does business by ensuring that their systems will always be up to date with the latest software."

Best Practice Tips from St. Croix County

Besides teaming up with a partner like CherryRoad, the following are some recommendations from St. Croix County officials to help their peers throughout the country transition to the cloud:

• Get help with the RFP – The county enlisted the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) to help draft the RFP and review responses.

• Review data early – Organizations should decide what data they want to move to the cloud and remove or update data that is obsolete, redundant, incomplete or improperly formatted.

• Supplement staff – The county brought on temporary staff to help backfill key positions during set up and throughout the process. Testing and training can consume a lot of time from the regular workload of employees.

• Manage change – Involve employees and obtain their buy-in as a vital component to success.

READY FOR THE FUTURE

Moving forward, the county plans to bring in more employee self-services and overhaul its point-of-sale (POS) system to make it more user friendly. The opportunities will continue to unfold as the county rolls out new features and more data is added to the system. In the meantime, migrating finance and HR applications to the cloud is already paying off by bringing insights, efficiency and innovation to the workplace and the community — without the costs, complexity and built-in obsolescence of an on-premises solution.


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