CLOUD-POWERED BACK OFFICE PAVES WAY TO MODERNIZATION IN ST. CROIX COUNTY

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,[1]) 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

purchase, it now flows automatically to the correct cost center and account.

Take the highway department, for example. The county builds and maintains its own roads, and can easily spend one million dollars in a single day. Staying on track is now possible, and finance managers now know how much money is encumbered. The solution also helps with compliance and reporting on state-regulated services such as the county's nursing home.

The services' intuitive reporting features have also been a huge boon in terms of expediting decision-making and reducing reliance on analysts and IT staff. In the past, departmental employees had to depend on IT or the finance department to pull reports, and often waited one or two days for results. Today, these employees can immediately generate their own reports with easy-to-use tools and a user-friendly interface.

And, as a wave of workers retire, Oracle's HR reporting and talent management tools will expedite the hiring and onboarding of new employees.

The built-in functionality and ease of use weren't the only advantages that attracted the county. Because the service is cloud-based and maintained by Oracle, the county's back-office systems will always be on the leading edge of innovation and technology. System updates are organic, and the county no longer bears the operational and financial burdens of maintaining the system. In addition, the system can easily expand to accommodate the county's growth.

A NEED FOR EXPERTISE

St. Croix had never implemented any kind of system of this magnitude, and needed a partner who knew the Oracle system and had public sector experience. CherryRoad was instrumental in providing the expertise, services and long-term support that St. Croix County needed to be successful.

The CherryRoad team could predict how certain decisions would impact the county in the future. "We saved St. Croix a lot of time and heartache," says Stephen Lange, CherryRoad president and chief operating officer. "We helped navigate new workflows and processes that made sense for them."

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.

1. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

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