EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Automation Systems for Office of Defense Cooperation Malaysia

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Introduction

As a result of rapid development in information technology (IT) and end-user computing, many new ideas and innovative ways of doing things are discovered every day. In the field of security assistance (SA), to cope with the workload generated by regulations and administrative processes, security assistance officers (SAOs) can employ automation systems, specifically computer programs, to increase efficiency and productivity in their office. Such automated systems are applications developed by end-users, who are the subject matter experts and know the specific outputs they desire. These applications are easily developed and used. Commonly used computer applications such as spreadsheets, word processing documents, and databases allow easy data input, storage, sharing, retrieval and manipulation. Whatever their form or level of complexity, the central question in developing these programs is, how does this application make my work easier? The Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) Malaysia developed three automated systems to reduce redundant paperwork, store data, and track deadlines that are worthy of sharing with the security assistance community at large.

Automation Systems used in the Office of Defense Cooperation Malaysia

The ODC Malaysia developed three automated systems to assist the office's personnel in their day-to-day activities. The information collected by these applications is shared on the office's server for all to see. Why were these systems developed? They are many reasons, but the following are the key needs that drove the development of these applications:

- A need for efficient time management

- A need to reduce routine, redundant, and time consuming tasks

- Common requirements for similar information

- A need to reduce paperwork volume and data entry errors

- A need for fast retrieval of information

To tackle the problems listed above, ODC Malaysia developed the following applications:

- ODC Training Support System (OTSS) - tracks international military education and training (IMET), Counter-Terrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP), foreign military sales (FMS), and Title 10 program training and administrative requirements.

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- Foreign Military Sales Tracking System (FTS) organizes case data and correspondence, tracks deadlines, and generates reports

- Contact Management Program - organizes and shares all contacts within the office

All the applications were developed using Microsoft Access© Database. This program allows storage of large amounts of information, detailed searches, quick information retrieval, and automated report generation.

The ODC Malaysia tailored each system to fit the security assistance program's requirements. Further, each program reduced the time spent on repetitive tasks such as generating reports and letters, or producing statistics. In doing so, these systems allowed each office member to focus their time on other tasks.

Office of Defense Cooperation Training Support System

Developed in November 1998, this application was originally created to store and manage military officers' records, which were previously stored in a word processing document. ODC officers found this process tedious and time consuming. The data entry required resulted in data entry mistakes, and once entered, the information was not easily manipulated. After analyzing the information and the data storeage requirements, ODC Malaysia determined the program for the job was Microsoft Access©. This program is a database application, which stores, retrieves and manipulates information easily. After meeting the basic requirement of storing and retrieving data, Access provided opportunities for data analysis not anticipated by the officers.

Office of Defense officers streamlined other training functions. The main focus was reducing repetitive paperwork through automation. For example, ODC officers could save time by automating routine letters, faxes, memos, reports, and by using information stored in the database. Gradually, the functionality of the application increased to the point that the program is a one-stop shop for all student processing activities. Each button on the display screen provides a hotlink to other functions. This feature of OTSS highlights the efficiency and advantage of end user development applications.
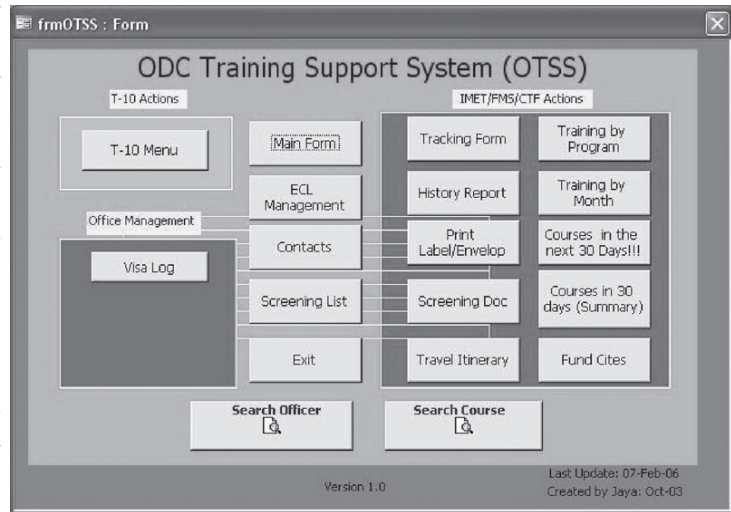

Figure 1. **Main Menu for ODC Training Support System**.

Another ancillary benefit of this approach is that it involves security assistance practitioners in increasing the productivity and efficiency of the training system. While it is difficult to measure the added benefit of this program in quantifiable terms, there is a qualitative increase in teamwork and ownership. The design process for OTSS encouraged ODC officers to work more closely together by sharing their work systems. It caused SA officers to examine their office procedures and compare them with others. In developing OTSS, officers felt greater ownership since they could design and implement a system that would benefit themselves. These unanticipated effects go a long way in advancing a positive and creative work environment in the office. A case in point is the development of OTSS spurred the development of two subsequent programs FTS and Contact Management Programs.

Figure 2. A snapshot of officer's details screen with photo. Through this form, users can view when human rights vetting was completed, detailed biographic data, invitational travel orders, and print various automated faxes and memos.

Figure 3. A snapshot of an Allocation Letter for Ministry of Defense. All information required to generate this letter was obtained from the OTSS and TMS linked data bases.

The following are some of the capabilities of the program:

- Generate Initiation Letters for confirmed courses

  - Manage English Comprehension Level (ECL) activities

  - Process visa application memo

  - Process, store, and track human rights vetting information

  - Track officers processing status

  - Manage officers' information (e.g., update rank, position title)

  - Print various report (historical course data, officers data, etc.

  - Store Biographical Data Form and Invitational Travel Order (ITO)

  - Generate faxes, letters, and memos on various subjects using Microsoft© Word document template

Foreign Military Sales Tracking System

The FTS was developed in December 2002. This program assists the FMS program manager in tracking deadlines, consolidating files and e-mails under one case record, and generating reports. These attributes allowed one FMS program manager to increase the number of managed cases by controlling data more easily.
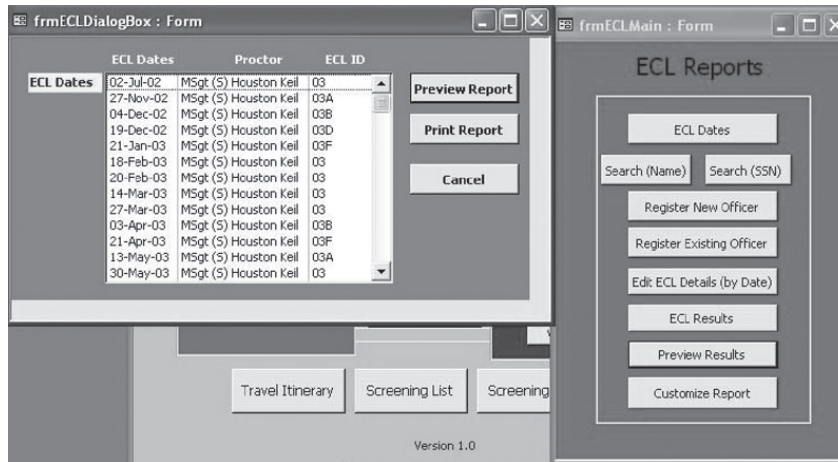

Figure 4. English Comprehensive Language Test Management Interfaces. All activities pertaining to ECL are managed through these interfaces.

The greatest concern in FMS management in Malaysia centered on meeting deadlines. The FTS was designed to remind the case manager, host nation, and the U.S. agencies of upcoming deadlines on the case. The automatic feature allows for a fail safe reminder for a suspense. Examples of deadlines tracked by FTS are listed below.

- Price and availability (P&A) request date

- P&A received date

- P&A expiration date

- LOA received date

- LOA expiration date

This attribute of FTS enables the FMS program manager to track multiple FMS cases by automatically providing reminders.

A second feature of FTS is that it consolidates multiple sources of information pertaining to the case into one record. For instance, the manager could store copies of the LORs, LOAs, important e-mails, modifications, and amendments in one centrally located

Figure 5. Main Menu for FMS Tracking System.

file. Further, the manager could store details of point of contacts from the U.S. and Malaysia, for continuity purposes as case management changed hands. To reduce the steps in completing actions, managers could send e-mails directly from the same window. Essentially, the goal is to make it a one-stop experience for the case manager, just as the OTTS.
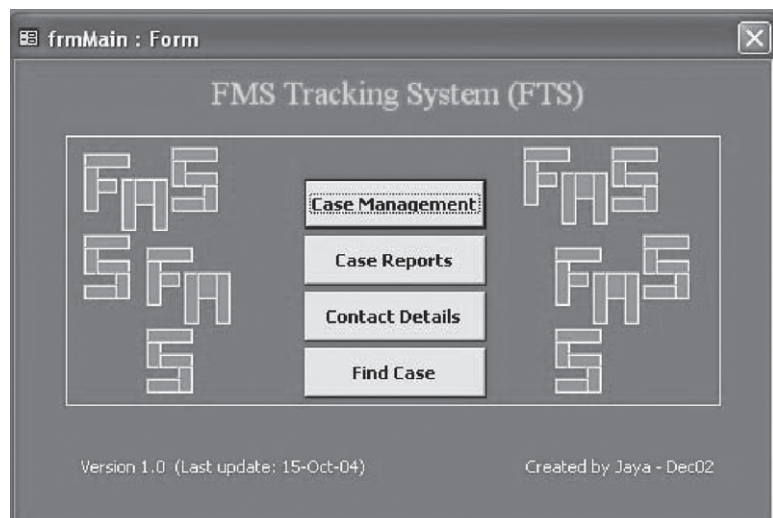
Figure 6. A snapshot of FMS Case screen with case details and linked documents.

The value of keeping records in a standardized methodology, accessible to all can not be overstated. Every two to three years the ODC will undergo a change in FMS managers. Handovers between managers occur suddenly and often. When handovers occur, the amount of data absorbed is limited. Often, FMS managers are inexperienced and fresh from DISAM; in some cases they have not attended the Security Cooperation Management - Overseas (SCM-O) course. The FTS provides a standardized format for data management in the FMS arena. Sharing that information, critical to the operations of the ODC, is easily accomplished through this system. However, this system is only as good as the information provided and updated.

Another facet that ODC Malaysia (ODC-MY) designed in the FTS was standardized reports. These reports are automatically generated for case management purposes and trend analysis. Physically researching cases proved to be time consuming and repetitive. Below are some of the reports ODC-MY found productive. Each report summary can be printed out using the application.

- LOA expiration report (List all LOA's that has not been accepted)

- FMS report by dates (list all cases by timeframe e.g., the last one year)

- FMS report by year (list number of new cases by year and value)

- FMS case summary by implementing agencies (IA)

- FMS case summary by program originator (PO)

- FMS case summary by status (divided into four categories)

  •• Active

  •• Closed

  •• Closure

  •• Pending

Contact Management Program

The Contact Management Program was developed in 2006 to centralize the collection of office business contacts' information in a single location. The contacts management program allows the ODC officers to share their contact's details. Each contact is entered in the data base by a central point, an office management specialist. This is critical to maintain a standard format for data entry.

The program was built to search categorically, view, add, edit, and print information expeditiously. While away from the office, ODC personnel can take this information on the road by downloading the files to office laptops.
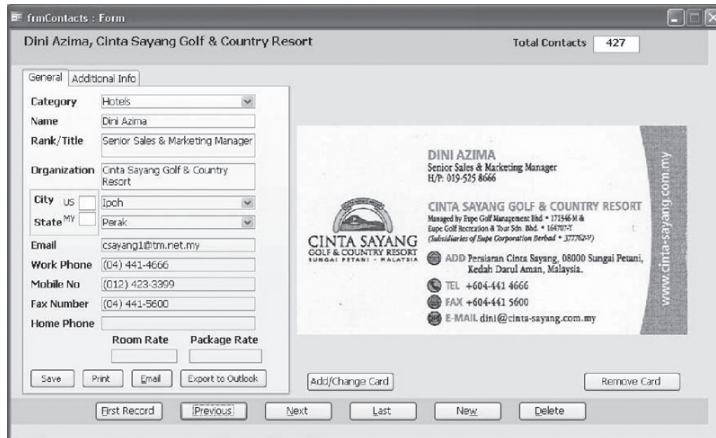
Figure 7. A snapshot of contact's details screen with business card.

The key feature of this program is its user-friendly search capability. Most of the time officers want to find a specific contact. Instead of going through a long list of names, the contacts program can quickly search and locate the contact according to name, company, location, and categories.

Users can also e-mail contacts directly from this application and export contacts from this program to their Microsoft Outlook© Contact's Folder. The ability to integrate both applications results in additional time saving as users do not have to reenter the same contact's details into Outlook.
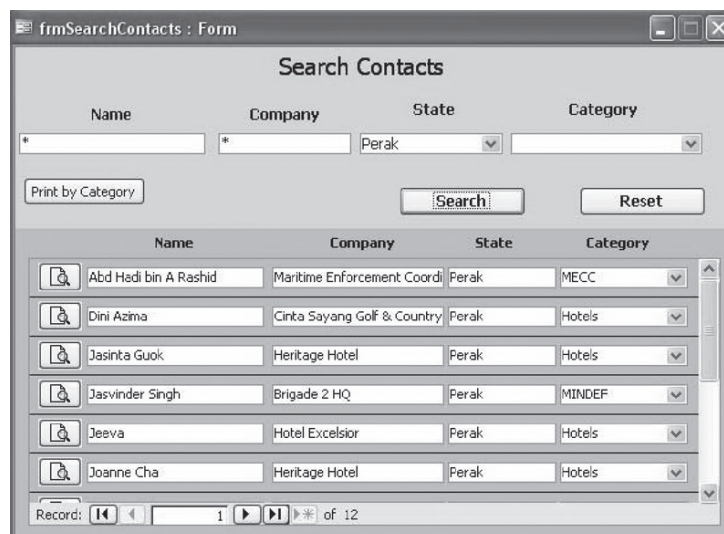

Figure 8. A sample of contact's search screen with a list of returned contacts.

Automation Benefits

Better Time Management and Improved Productivity

The importance of time management cannot be overemphasized. Security assistance operations require a certain amount of leanness in operations. As requirements for program management continue to increase, and scrutiny on personnel usage continues, ODCs are faced with increasing office productivity. Automation systems such as the ones discussed above can help any office efficiently manage their time by reducing mundane data entry, sharing information among office personnel, standardizing data storage, and reducing the number of physical records. These benefits reduce stress and improve office productivity. Improved productivity enables personnel to focus on more important tasks and make better decisions when armed with a higher fidelity of information.

Promoting a Positive Work Environment

By involving program managers in an application's design, not only is the utility of the program increased, but it builds a stronger office. While the ODC developed each application, office members worked together to produce the best application possible, which would benefit everyone. This process increases office teamwork and employee ownership, all of which fosters a positive and productive work environment.

Longevity of Information

Database applications also serve a repository when security assistance officers transition. New personnel to an ODC can get an idea of the office methodology of information management and office procedures through these automated systems. Information is readily available to all office personnel, while a standardized search process allows everyone to use the information effectively. Everyone can access the OTSS, FTS and Contacts Management program and data. If someone is out of the office, another person can answer an unexpected question. Further, a centralized location helps to maintain valuable information long after former security assistance officers have departed the office.

Conclusion

Tested and proven systems such as the OTSS, FTS, and Contacts Management can be and should be shared among SAO's. The benefits of these applications improve the data processing, retrieval, storage, and manipulation for all SAOs. Each application must be adjusted to meet the specific ODC's needs and adjustments are easily accomplished through officer involvement. Before automation systems are developed and implemented, they must be carefully analyzed for their usefulness, and once they are developed, the office must be committed using and supporting the system. Otherwise, it will just be another system in the office that is not utilized.

About the Author

Jayakumar Arasan is the Management Information System Assistant and Training Specialist at the Office of Defense Cooperation, American Embassy Kuala, Lumpur. He joined the ODC in February 1998. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and a Master's degree in Information Technology from the University Utara Malaysia. He is responsible for designing and developing innovative application systems to improve office productivity.