

counting product's capabilities fully and can focus on the projects that will impact their success in the marketplace.

Weyrich says he centered on Hyperion because its accounting solutions more than satisfied The Signature Group's system requirements. "Hyperion's graphical report writer is by far the best on the market. With it we're not locked into a structure—we can change our point of view within a report and slice and dice the information any way we want. And the road map of flowcharts and icons in the customized desktop is so

it would speed training—but we still braced ourselves for a long learning process. The proof to us was in our learning curve. We built a schedule with a week's worth of training, and, to our surprise, we pretty much had everyone comfortable with the system in one day."

Weyrich adds that part of the beauty of a "worry free" implementation is being able to spend your time addressing which financial processes you seek to change most. Weyrich was adamant that the system users be able to post and run reports themselves—during the day—rather than

The implementation was quick and painless.

flexible it's virtually impossible for users to get lost within the system." Weyrich also praises Hyperion's consulting and support services, which he says represent some of the best in the business. "For us, that was the winning combination. We wouldn't settle for anything less."

Weyrich admits that knowing Hyperion would follow through with its implementation commitments was a welcome relief. "We had an extensive chart of accounts that would require immediate use of every facet of the new system. We knew we were going to be dealing with a huge conversion effort, and the last thing I had time to worry about was a costly, problematic implementation period."

Training came next for Weyrich's group. Because so many people were using the data, he prepared for a costly training period and a long, extensive learning curve. "We liked Hyperion's user interface and believed

having to bring in additional resources and often wait overnight for the system to supply them with results. Today, this desire is a reality, and the significant departmental productivity gains are the spoils.

Weyrich says the key to his reengineering success was finding an accounting solution vendor he could trust—one who honored its commitment to provide a first-rate product and complete customer satisfaction. He says he's not a bit surprised that Hyperion recently was found by INPUT, an independent market research firm, to rank first in customer satisfaction against PeopleSoft, Dun & Bradstreet Software, Oracle, and SAP. "Hyperion's consultants came in and helped us fit everything together. Knowing that they've worked on the accounting side of the business was comforting because we knew they understood exactly what we were trying to accomplish." ■

FINDING THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY WITH SQL FINANCIALS

Nearly 400 years ago, Jamestown settlers manufactured and used chemicals such as alum for tanning hides and potash for soap and glass. Since then, the chemical industry has grown to become the third-largest U.S. manufacturing industry.

The Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA), representing 185 chemical companies, is one of the oldest and most established trade associations in North America. It serves as the focal point for the chemical industry's collective action on legislative, regulatory, and legal matters at the international, national, state, and local levels. A number of its innovative programs, such as Responsible Care®, help the chemical industry improve its performance in the management of chemicals.

CMA is composed of two types of operations: primary dues-funded operations and self-funded activities, such as the CHEMical Self-Funded Technical Advocacy and Research (CHEMSTAR) department. CHEMSTAR offers ways for companies and other associations to affiliate on a self-supporting basis.

In the early 1970s, CHEMSTAR had between six and 12 voluntary self-funded groups, each with its own budget and reporting requirements. When CHEMSTAR grew in the 1980s, the Chemical Manufacturers Association acquired an IBM System 36 (and later an AS/400) and a customized financial system,

which recorded the activity of each of these groups. This basic financial reporting system ran for 13 years with few modifications.

By the 1990s, however, CHEMSTAR had grown to 50 self-funded groups. As the organization evolved, managers began to need timely and comprehensive information from the financial system as their responsibilities had increased. For example, managers would get accounting statements once a month, according to Devonne Bilal, manager of CHEMSTAR Services. "By the time statements were delivered, they were five to six weeks old," she said. "In addition, there were a lot of mechanics involved to get information into or out of the software. The entire process was difficult for anyone who wasn't in accounting."

In addition, the custom AS/400 financial software had certain limitations. "As we created more history on several programs," Eric Whiteley, assistant controller, said, "we needed to overwrite data elements that cropped up. And on certain applications, only one user could do work on a monthly basis because the programs weren't designed for multiple users. Once we expanded our accounting support for the company, we required the flexibility of having several people using the system at once."

From a technical perspective, the AS/400 system was becoming a challenge to support. "With new technologies

emerging," Jim Linn, associate director of the Information Technology Division, explained, "we found far more technical staff members interested in working on client/server."

So, early in 1993, CHEMSTAR formed a three-person team of Whiteley, Bilal, and Linn to examine several accounting software options, including SQL Financials, one of the first fully functional client/server financial systems available.

"We began to see several benefits of such systems immediately," Bilal said. "The GUI offered a basic consistency across applications that we realized would lead to greater ease of use and productivity. That was important because one of the major drawbacks to the old system was its inaccessibility to nonaccountants."

The group also identified other requirements, including timely access to information and flexible reporting. "Since we didn't have a procurement system," Whiteley noted, "we wanted to track that type of information in our general ledger via a flexible budgeting feature. We also wanted our accounting package to help us meet fiduciary requirements to track information, not only for the two primary sections of the company, but for groups and even subgroups. That was a challenge because by now we had grown to about 65 groups that needed to track 160 different financial reports."

Other requirements included the need to track the results of financial transactions, commitment activities, contractual obligations, and budget information. The deciding factor in choosing

SQL Financials proved to be ease of use and sophistication of technology. Late in 1993, the company licensed SQL Financials' General Ledger and subsequently has licensed Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivables, Revenue Accounting, and Fixed Assets.

"SQL Financials' architecture proved to be an excellent fit," Linn said. "A complementary association package we licensed also was written in Gupta's SQL-Windows and shared a similar user interface. In addition, while we decided to implement the package on a Pentium server running Gupta's SQLBase, we understood that at some time we might want to change both hardware and database

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platforms. SQL Financials' open approach lets customers make the switch in a seamless fashion. This is important because it often is difficult to predict future technology or business changes."

Assistant Controller Whiteley also noted that the SQL Financials system would enable him to service his end-users better. "We saw that empowering them to interact with certain features of the application would facilitate their financial tracking and reporting, which in turn would provide management with important information more quickly."

Linn continued, "The SQL Financials support staff was excellent during implementation. They had answers for

us regardless of when we called—late in the evening or early morning. They followed through to make sure we were satisfied. They understood what we were trying to achieve and followed through to ensure we were satisfied."

During implementation, Whiteley performed two major roles. "First, I had to ensure that the implementation was consistent with the accounting policies and procedures of CMA, not just CHEMSTAR, since we planned ultimately to expand the application's use to the entire company," he said. "As part of that, we focused on creating a new chart of accounts that was futures oriented. I sought input from the rest of the ac-

counting managers in order to achieve a suitable structure." In addition, he added, "I created the mapping format from the old chart of accounts to the new one so that we could bring a year's worth of historical data forward. We wanted to ensure that CHEMSTAR could get the reports it wanted in the format it wanted them in with as much history as was feasible."

The results of implementation have been equally satisfying. Bilal explained: "Today, every staff member has access to timely information. In addition to the core set of reports we use, we've also developed custom reports to meet our specific needs. And by having our users export data to Microsoft Excel spreadsheets

directly from the system, we've reduced access time to critical information by 50% to 75%."

SQL Financials also brought about an unexpected result. "By getting managers more active in working with the system and by giving them extra training, we've increased their financial literacy and understanding of the process," she said. "As a result, relations among company groups and our overall productivity have improved."

According to Whiteley, "Because of the reporting flexibility, we were able to reduce the time it takes to produce certain 990 tax filing information from one and a half days to 10 minutes. We've also gained sophistication in our ability to report on both a fiscal year basis and a life cycle basis by using overriding report capabilities to create project-to-date reports."

By mid-year 1996, the company decided to shift to Oracle 7, according to Linn. "Fortunately, SQL Financials is database independent and allowed us to migrate with little disruption," she said. In addition, now the entire Chemical Manufacturers Association uses the new financial products.

Whiteley summarized the benefits of the SQL Financials applications to his office. "Today we have information on demand," he said. "And once our staff was trained, we became completely self-sufficient in obtaining the reports we need. That's important, because when you are expected to deliver financial information for that big meeting coming up, it's good to know that you have in your power the ability to produce timely information." ■