

THE BACKGROUND

When Hamilton School District Business Manager Bryan Ruud contacted the district's business software provider about establishing a crisis recovery center at the software company's headquarters, the details of the arrangement caused him to rethink his operating procedures, with extremely positive results.

A 10-year user of Regional Data Services, Inc.'s (RDS) "EdEase" School Administrative Software, Ruud found that in order to set up the center, he would have to maintain not only back-up files, but also a substantial supply of all forms used by the district. Would it not be better both in terms of cost and security, he reasoned, if the preprinted forms could be replaced by electronic form templates (which could be printed as needed, directly to plain paper, on their own printer)?

Based in the Milwaukee suburb of Sussex, the district serves 3,900 students from several nearby communities, with seven schools and a payroll of 435 teachers and non-faculty personnel. Primary activities of their lean business office staff (seven people) include handling the purchasing, payroll, accounts payable and teacher contracts. Each activity has required its own preprinted forms.

THE PROBLEM

Although payroll is about 80 percent direct deposit, printed advice of deposit vouchers, as well as printed checks, are required for the other 20 percent. At year-end, W-2 and 1099 tax forms are also required. Purchasing requires five-part carbonless forms, and teacher contracts involves production of individual, separate, multi-page documents for each teacher. The district business office's IBM AS/400 computer drove two heavy-duty dot matrix printers to output the completed documents. The data environment also includes a Novell network of IBM PCs for student data, grading and general office activities.

Ruud first explored the idea of converting to laser-printed electronic forms with Standard Register, one of his preprinted forms suppliers. Standard Register had a solution but it was not native AS/400, and required transfer of data to the PC environment for check-processing and production. What Ruud sought was a pure AS/400 solution that generated completed documents and checks directly from the platform.

THE SOLUTION

"When we expressed this concern to RDS, they suggested that we contact ACOM Solutions, a new business partner," he says. "ACOM's iSeries (AS/400) solution did not require a PC in the middle, and furthermore, the company could provide everything we needed to make the conversion, including excellent professional services."

ACOM's forms solution is a turn-key electronic document printing solution that was developed specifically for use in the IBM iSeries (AS/400) computing environment. It allows users to create electronic templates of their business forms, checks and labels. Users can position their various elements on-screen through a click-and-drag PC WYSIWYG* design process. The templates reside on the iSeries (AS/400) computer.

When a form, check or label is required, the iSeries (AS/400) merges the appropriate data with the respective template and spools the combined file out to a laser printer, where the complete, finished document is generated, using blank paper, blank security check stock or blank label stock. Importantly, the solution is seamlessly compatible with all ERP, CRM, legacy and accounting management software, making it ideal for education environments using the Regional Data Services solution.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

Ruud made the decision to purchase the ACOM solution in spring, 2001, but held off taking delivery until summer, when school activity slowed down. The iSeries (AS/400) package they purchased included the GUI design tool, the eForms module, the MICR laser checks module, professional design services, and ACOM's maintenance contract. The solution also included a Xerox DocuPrint N2050 network laser printer solution (MICR-enhanced by ACOM) and the Secure-A-Card PCMCIA card and reader. Secure-A-Card provides secure storage of the district's digitized corporate information, logos, graphics, MICR lines, and signatures. The printer will not produce checks without insertion of the card, so when checks are needed, the card is placed in the reader slot on the printer. On completion of the check run, it is removed and returned to safe storage.

The professional design services that Ruud ordered included creation of the following documents for the district:

- Payroll checks
- Direct deposit vouchers
- W2 forms

* WYSIWYG = What You See Is What You Get

■ Purchase orders

After delivery of the solution, Accounts Payable Manager Patty Schaefer adapted a model check-form within the iSeries (AS/400) for AP payments, and others on Ruud's staff converted the teacher contracts to electronic form. Generation of each contract, like completion of the other forms, simply requires polling the database for the information and spooling out the combined files to produce sharp professional looking laser-printed documents. They will soon be converting the 1099 form, which will be ready by the time 2002 income reports must be filed, in early 2003.

The Xerox MICR-enhanced laser printer is dedicated to MICR laser check and voucher production, using blank security check stock, while the other documents are produced on their offices' two Hewlett-Packard laser printers, which the iSeries (AS/400) also supports.

Installation was easy, Ruud says. ACOM mailed the iSeries (AS/400) and GUI design tool software from its Atlanta offices to Wisconsin, where Ruud personally installed it. When ACOM's professional services team had completed design of the initial forms, they emailed the files to the district and the ACOM trainer came to Sussex to set them up, tune the printers and train the users.

■ SUCCESS!

"Now, everything is produced on blank paper stock," Ruud says. "This not only saves the district several thousand dollars per year on reprinting, inventory and handling costs here at district headquarters, but it also solves the problem of maintaining a supply of the forms recovery at RDS' facility. We simply post them electronically. Moreover, we used to carry \$6,000 maintenance agreements on our big dot matrix printers, and we no longer have that expense."

The business office has also been able to modify some operating procedures as a result of the new electronic checks and documents solution, Ruud says. For example, accounts payable used to be done monthly. Now it's done on a weekly basis, which is more convenient for AP Manager Schaefer and very nicely received by vendors.

"People generally resist change," Ruud notes, "and there was some apprehension, but the solution is so convenient and easy to use, saves so much time and produces such professional results that no one would ever want to go back to the old ways."

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