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Belgium's Economic Data Goes Online

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BELGIUM'S ECONOMIC DATA GOES ONLINE

by Jenny Mangelsdorf

Well into the 21st century, the Belgian government found some of its operations resembling something from the turn of the prior century. So the Federal Public Service (FPS) Economy, then known as the Belgian Ministry of Economics, set its sights on evolving into a more modern organization, one focused on its customers — the country's citizens and businesses that provide and request economic and demographic data for decision-making support. With our help, and with the ultimate goal of stimulating the Belgian economy, FPS Economy fulfilled its vision with the rollout of a new, integrated data warehouse that provides interactive, near real-time data to its customers.

"Adopting a citizen-centric approach was a major cultural shift for the FPS Economy," says Frank De Saer, FPS Economy IT director. "However, it allowed us to fundamentally redesign the way we do business."

A culture change

Driving FPS Economy's need for a new approach was a growing aversion to paper and manual surveys, increasing demands by citizens and businesses for integrated online output, shrinking budgets, increasingly complex international regulations, and diminishing resources — the organization expects 30 percent of its staff to retire in the next five years.

FPS Economy also wanted to position itself as a key provider of statistical economic data in Belgian and EU environments, among competitors such as the National Bank of Belgium, Belgium's National Planning Department, regional statistical departments, and Eurostat, which provides statistical information at the European level.

This meant moving from a culture and structure of separate activity, or silos, to an entirely new management approach that would enable the efficient production and use of information and statistics to understand, regulate and stimulate Belgium's economy.

FPS Economy's primary source of strategic economic data is its National Institute of Statistics (NIS) division, which generates roughly 80 percent of the FPS Economy's statistical data. About 600 NIS employees generate this data through the division's 70 statistical systems. They also access data from the country's "Crossroads Bank for Enterprise" database, which stores all basic information on enterprises and their individual business locations, and incorporates data from multiple sources. These sources include the country's former National Register of Legal Entities, former Trade Register, Value-Added Tax (VAT) Register, and Social Security Administration.

"It was crucial to use existing institutional databases, such as the National Register, Social Security and VAT, to reduce primary data collection and administrative work," says Stany Boes, CSC Business Intelligence Practice manager in Belgium. "The core idea was that if data was already available in digital format, the NIS should not collect it again."

Business intelligence, data warehousing expertise

FPS Economy began a competitive process to find an expert teammate who could support the NIS data warehouse project and provide IT consulting, system analysis, design and implementation. FPS Economy selected CSC because of our heritage in supporting Belgium's public sector and industry-recognized best practices in business intelligence and data warehousing.

After CSC performed a feasibility study, FPS Economy chose an SAS business intelligence platform to support the NIS data warehouse. A joint CSC and FPS Economy IT team began to implement the new solution. As part of the assignment, we also began transferring to both FPS Economy business and IT users the project and change management know-how, which would enable them to focus on improving analytical processes and data architecture rather than on simply managing data collection and delivery.

FPS Economy's objectives were to standardize IT tools and methodologies for all data coming into the NIS; fully automate data collection, input, processing and output; implement browser-based dynamic Web applications; and offer high-performance statistical tools for "heavy" users, such as statisticians, who have to define and take samples in order to define the population for a survey.

A matter of scope

The scope of the project was enormous. FPS Economy uses more than 300 core processes, gathers data from many external sources, utilizes hundreds of databases, and produces statistics about diverse topics, including economic indicators, social demographics, price indexes, traffic accidents, real estate and agricultural prices.

"This project is an in-depth example of a combination of reengineering of core processes with the advanced use of data warehouse techniques in order to improve citizen-centric services," says Boes.

FPS Economy's guiding principles were added value for public money, improved service and greater cost efficiency. The end result is a new NIS data warehouse that has all data in a single environment in which users can view dynamic reports with deep drill-down functionality. The warehouse is constantly updated and available so clients can rapidly obtain key socioeconomic information from FPS Economy. Through a Web interface, external users — citizens and businesses — can access statistics using a self-service mode and create their own tables and graphs based on the parameters or layout they want.

"Cooperating with an expert partner like CSC helped us set up a strong project governance structure to safeguard the alignment of business and IT," says FPS Economy's De Saer. "Together, we have made FPS Economy a European pioneer in our ability to provide interactive, near real-time data to our customers." ■

Client: Federal Public Service (FPS) Economy

Challenge: Create a system for accessing economic data that would enable the efficient production, delivery and use of strategic economic information for Belgium's citizens and businesses.

Solution: A CSC-led business process integration project that reengineers FPS Economy's data infrastructure and installs a business intelligence system that draws on all National Institute of Statistics data sources and accesses other federal databases.

Results: An integrated data warehouse solution that enables automated paperless data input and output, is accessible by browser-based applications, and presents economic data directly to end users through a dynamic Internet portal.

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CSC makes a special point of understanding its clients and provides experts with real-world experience to work with them. CSC is vendor-independent, delivering solutions that best meet each client's unique requirements.

For more than 50 years, clients in industries and governments worldwide have trusted CSC with their business process and information systems outsourcing, systems integration and consulting needs.

The company trades on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol "CSC."

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