

Microsoft® Project 2000



Microsoft Office Application

InterKnowledge Case Study



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InterKnowledge is a young company that provides software consulting and solutions to rapidly growing customer base . With core skills in e-commerce and multitier application design and installation, the consultants at InterKnowledge find their talents in great demand—and their time in short supply. To help these technical professionals track their time efficiently and accurately, InterKnowledge has implemented a sophisticated timecard-reporting solution based on Microsoft® Project 2000 and Microsoft Project Central.

Situation

Over the course of barely a year, the San Diego–area software-consulting company InterKnowledge grew to more than three dozen people, extended operations into a branch office, and began to serve a customer base distributed across four states. With growth, however, came the challenge of maintaining a focus on what the company does best—helping customers to accelerate development and reduce the risks of deploying technically complex Internet systems. For Dave Hulse, who works as a program manager at InterKnowledge, and his colleagues, meeting this challenge meant finding a way to minimize the time and effort that consultants and managers had to spend on administrative tasks. Chief among those time-consuming tasks were timecard reporting and evaluation.

The drawbacks of the approach that InterKnowledge had been using, which required employees to e-mail a weekly log of their hours to the finance department, were obvious. InterKnowledge bills customers by the hour, so it's critical for the firm to maintain an accurate assessment of projects, tasks that consultants are assigned within each project, and hours devoted to each task. Yet individual e-mail messages could not capture that level of detail. Nor could they provide time traces, consolidated views, or a clear tracking of hours worked toward a given project phase or milestone.

Solution

In response, Hulse and a team of internal developers decided to customize Microsoft® Project 2000 and Microsoft Project Central into a solution that could be easily integrated into the company's overall project management systems and that could be accessed from any location. The team based the solution on Project 2000 and Project Central largely because they knew those products would integrate smoothly into their Microsoft Windows® 2000-based infrastructure. They also liked the integration of enterprise project-management capabilities, as provided by Microsoft Project 2000, with Web-based collaboration capabilities, as provided by Microsoft Project Central.

Hulse and his team crafted the solution by taking advantage of the fact that Microsoft Project 2000 automatically creates a database table using Microsoft SQL Server™ 7.0 technology and uses it to store Project Central files containing information about tasks and hours worked. Using Microsoft Visual Studio®, the team developed an add-on that linked the data from the existing database to the company's invoicing application. They also customized Project Central fields (1) to distinguish between billable and non-billable tasks and approved and non-approved timecards and (2) to publish the information to a company extranet for easy access by employees.

Project 2000 and Project Central play equally significant roles in the timecard-reporting solution. Project 2000 handles the schedules, the common resource pools, the billing rates, and the flags distinguishing billable and non-billable hours. Project Central is responsible primarily for time-tracking and for providing the Web-based interface through which employees access the solution.

To use the timecard-reporting solution, each employee enters his or her daily hours worked into a timesheet available through a Project Central front end on the company extranet. At the end of week, Project 2000 performs an automatic update by pushing the information to Project Central and sending a message to the project manager showing a detailed time log in the manager's choice of HTML or Microsoft Excel format.

In a near-term enhancement to their timecard-reporting solution, InterKnowlogy developers will enable the solution to transfer data directly from Microsoft Project 2000 and Microsoft Project Central into the company's accounting system. Ultimately, they will integrate the solution with a SQL-based electronic action-item system. This move will allow action items and bug reports to be linked to projects and tasks defined in Project 2000, for an even more streamlined approach to project and financial management.

With these enhancements, InterKnowlogy managers will be able to spend less time on administrative tasks, says Hulse, so they'll find it easier to keep their eye on critical design and development milestones. In addition, administrative staff will be relieved of much of the burden of supporting ongoing operations, so they'll be able to focus on training, recruiting, and continually improving the company's principle operating policies. "The idea is to free up the time and talents of people at all levels of the organization," he says. "That way, they'll be able to do what they do best: keeping InterKnowlogy successful."

Key Features of Microsoft Project 2000 and Microsoft Project Central

- **Support for collaboration.** The InterKnowlogy timecard-reporting solution relies on the integration of a Project Central front end and Project 2000 capabilities such as task delegation and status reporting to deliver project information from management to employees and vice versa. As Hulse explains, “Developers really like this because it gives them more autonomy over schedules and the hours necessary to finish a project. It also takes a burden off the project manager because as soon as he or she accepts reports through Project Central, Project 2000 automatically pushes out updated schedules.” This capability is especially important on long-term tasks so that as project managers approach completion they can know how accurate their original estimates were.
- **Portfolio view.** With the Project Central portfolio view, InterKnowlogy consultants can view multiple projects simultaneously. This enables them to better understand how changes in one project can affect other projects they might be working on.
- **Task linking.** If there’s a schedule slip in one task, Project 2000 will show a slip in all the dependent tasks accordingly so managers can always know whether their project is on track. This capability is crucial for managing highly complex software-development projects with multiple interdependent tasks, which are InterKnowlogy’s specialty.
- **Resource pooling.** InterKnowlogy relies heavily on the resource pooling in Project 2000 to support multiple billing rates and to enable program managers to establish an estimated timeline, including the major tasks and number of people involved, to multiply the estimated hours by their billing rate, and to figure roughly the total cost. InterKnowlogy managers use resource pooling extensively in proposal development.

Benefits

- **More-informative timecards.** Hulse says that with Microsoft Project 2000 and Microsoft Project Central, timecards for InterKnowlogy employees provide far more information than before. Not only can managers know exactly how much time is spent on a given project, they also can know how much time is spent on each task in a project. Such knowledge will become even more valuable in the future. “As the company builds a database of completed projects, managers will be able to bid or estimate new projects with increasing accuracy,” he points out. “This will help the company to maximize its return on projects without overbooking consultants or bidding itself out of the running.”
- **Greater autonomy for employees.** With the bottom-up scheduling capabilities available through the use of Microsoft Project Central with Microsoft Project 2000, employees can update the status of existing tasks as well as create new tasks for themselves depending on the needs of a project at any given time. Hulse says this is essential at an organization like InterKnowlogy. “When you’re working with a highly skilled workforce on highly complex projects, people must be able to self-assign new tasks if they are to work at their potential.”

- **Timecard reporting from anywhere.** Wherever InterKnowlogy employees may be on assignment, they can easily access Microsoft Project Central over the Web to report their time worked. This is critical because many of the company's consultants work for weeks or months far from company headquarters—a practice that will increase as the company's customer base continues to grow. "The more InterKnowlogy consultants can do while they're away on assignment, the easier it is for everyone: managers, administrative personnel, and the consultants themselves," Hulse points out. "By enabling us to report our time worked and access other project-related information remotely, Project 2000 and Project Central are helping us all to work more productively."

With their timecard-reporting solution based on Microsoft Project 2000 and Project Central, consultants, managers, and administrators at InterKnowlogy are finding it easier to collaborate on complex and demanding projects, to provide highly detailed and accurate project estimates, and to stay informed about schedules and milestones no matter where they happen to be working. For InterKnowlogy, this means a workforce that is not only more productive but also more focused on what ultimately matters the most: delivering expert e-commerce solutions and multitier application design to an ever-growing base of customers.

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