Sentences™ Case Study

Argos Chooses the Lazy Route to Cost Control with Sentences

Argos Retail Group is the UK's largest multi-channel retailer with more than 20 million customers. There is an Argos catalogue in over two-thirds of UK households, and 98% of the population live within ten miles of an Argos store. Not surprisingly, IT plays a vital role in Argos' continued success.

Searching for a Departmental Computing Tool

Sentences was introduced to Argos by Lazysoft's business partner Nemea Consulting, as a candidate in Argos' search for a departmental computing tool to fill the gap between personal productivity tools such as Microsoft's Office and traditional high-end database environments such as DB2 and Oracle.

The main characteristics that Argos was looking for in such a tool were speed of development, multi-user capabilities, powerful ad hoc reporting and data extract facilities for end-users, and the ability to integrate easily with Argos' IT infrastructure.

The Requirement

The Argos Information Systems Department is responsible for the successful delivery of over 100 projects a year of varying sizes, and Sandra Hall, Development Support Manager, provides internal support services to the programme and project managers. Sandra had identified a need for a Project Control Database (PCD) to provide greater control over development project expenditure than the existing manual systems.

Says Sandra, "We needed the Project Control Database to support a central repository of suppliers, projects and cost data, and to deliver a range of benefits including improved accuracy and efficiency in processing and reconciling purchase orders and invoices, and improved project cost and performance reporting."

Avoiding Technology Islands

Argos is careful to avoid creating technology islands – products that are not widely used and not integrated – and will adopt only those products that integrate well into its existing infrastructure and which have to potential to play a role throughout the organisation. This meant that, as a new technology, Sentences had a lot to prove. Nevertheless, Sandra was attracted by its innovative approach. Keen to explore its capabilities

within IT before exposing it more widely within the company, she decided that it was a suitable vehicle for the PCD application.

The Project Control Database

Lazysoft's lead consultant Beth McCabe worked alongside Sandra's team to develop the application to their requirements. As well as fulfilling the objectives described above, the finished application includes a sophisticated portal, which logs in users and checks passwords, then presents them with individually tailored menus allowing them access to data entry functions and a range of 24 reports. It also accepts data from Argos' main general ledger to reconcile paid invoices.

Significantly, the entire Sentences application took no longer to develop than an early Access prototype which had much less functionality. The original estimate of 21 days' development effort came in at 25, but this included four days spent ensuring seamless integration with Argos' existing infrastructure.

Every successful project prompts users to ask for extra facilities, and here Sentences has really shown its mettle as significant enhancements have been achieved in a very short amount of development time.

"A Great Deal of Potential for Argos"

Sandra Hall is delighted with the results. After some early reservations, Sandra was particularly pleased with Sentences' omnicompetent user interface: "The native Sentences interface is extremely powerful and can eliminate the need to program browsing and query capabilities. It's based on the Explorer metaphor with which all Windows users are familiar, so it's very intuitive, and it harnesses the power of the associative model to let users explore the data and answer questions for themselves."

Assessing Sentences against her original criteria, Sandra concludes "As a departmental computing tool, Sentences has a great deal of potential for Argos."