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FTS app speeds up workflow

GSA bureau aims to keep its ordering system updated with Web application

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The Federal Technology Service is working to keep its own ordering system as up-to-date as the products and services it sells to government agencies.

Using GSA's online IT Solutions Shop application, agency buyers and service vendors can interact and do business. The app now has almost 14,000 users.

Over the last 18 months, the General Services Administration bureau has done most of its ordering through the IT Solutions Shop Web workflow application with a home page at it-solutions.gsa.gov.

FTS designed ITSS to automate and speed up the manual and paper processes that used to dominate the agency's workflow, said Bob Suda, assistant commissioner in the Office of Information Technology Integration.

Last year FTS handled about 10,000 civilian and defense orders worldwide amounting to $4 billion worth of goods and services, Suda said. Many orders were for IT services and support, not just computer and networking equipment—for example, integration services to go with a new LAN.

FTS as a guide

Some feds turn to FTS instead of other parts of GSA when they're not sure what they really need, Suda said. "We walk them through the process and help create a task order for them," he said.

Before ITSS, some FTS orders went as Microsoft Access or Excel spreadsheet attachments to Lotus Notes e-mail, Suda said. Most customers and vendors, however, ordered via paper forms and telephone calls.

"You'd be mailing all this information back and forth, and the workflow took a long time," Suda said.

In 1997, FTS started looking for a Web ordering and procurement system, which eventually became ITSS.

"Our intention was to go to the Web even then," Suda said, because the agency wanted worldwide access for about two dozen FTS employees who work at U.S. embassies and military bases abroad.

"It's a single point of entry for everybody who's involved in a task order to do business online all at one time," Suda said. If vendors, government buyers and FTS representatives log into ITSS at the same time, they can manage transactions in minutes instead of days.

ITSS was built using Domino Application Server from Lotus Development Corp., said ITSS project manager David R. Griffin, who works in a GSA Pacific Rim region office in San Diego.

After FTS established the ITSS requirements, systems integrator TechFlow Inc. of Solana Beach, Calif., did the coding.

ITSS went live late in 1998, but FTS has upgraded the application bit by bit since then. Version 3, which went online in mid-March, brought several new functions, primarily for GSA staff, said John Prahm, director of resource management staff for OITI. ITSS users on the FTS staff, at other federal agencies and at FTS' industry partners can all access the system through any Web browser, Suda said. Each user gets an account with a user name and a password.

Before using ITSS for the first time, agency and industry representatives must register through a secure, forms-based interface, Griffin said. The registration help desk processes the electronic applications. Signup requirements are more stringent for vendors than for federal workers to ensure that competitors don't get accounts under false pretenses. Registration requires a confirmation letter on company letterhead.

FTS now has about 7,000 federal clients and about 6,000 industry partners registered to use ITSS, Griffin said. The figures refer to individuals, not agencies or companies.

Another 600 or so FTS employees have access to ITSS, mainly to process task orders, Suda said.

Once logged in, agency customers and vendors see screens tailored to the information they need, Griffin said. For example, customer screens can create an order, authorize payment and examine purchase orders. Vendor screens can submit bids online and forward supporting information.

Two forms in one

Once customers know what they want to procure, they submit a statement of order to ITSS, Suda said. The system notifies an FTS representative of a work order to be handled. The representative can see the information on both the customer and the vendor sides.

Vendors who are registered with ITSS can bid on the order, and the FTS

staff in turn reviews the bids, awards the task order and manages it, Suda said.

Any registered vendor can submit bid quotes online, check the status of equipment orders and deliveries, and send supporting information or acceptance information, Griffin said.

While each order is in progress, it goes through a workflow process built into the Domino application, Suda said. The order follows a streamlined version of the old paper rules.

Orders used to take about 30 days to process, but now most are done within 15 days, Suda said. All signatures are electronic, and an audit trail follows the transactions.

From NT to clusters

ITSS runs under Microsoft Windows NT on two eight-way Unisys Aquanta ES rackmount servers and two four-way Unisys Aquanta QS/2 servers with Pentium II Xeon processors, Griffin said. Under an outsourcing agreement with Unisys Corp., the machines reside in one of the company's service centers in Eagan, Minn.

Future versions of ITSS will probably stay in the NT environment, Griffin said. Eventually he would like to migrate the application to high-end servers that use Domino's clustering capabilities.

About 95 percent of FTS orders now go through ITSS, Suda said.

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