



Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Professional Services

Customer Profile

IHL Consulting Group provides customized business intelligence for retailers and retail technology vendors. IHL is based in Franklin, Tennessee, and employs nine people.

Business Situation

IHL used to distribute its information through CDs and file transfers, and customers viewed it using the Microsoft® Access database. However, this limited use and the amount of data that IHL could include.

Solution

IHL designed Sophia, a Web-based service using the Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system and SQL Server™ 2000 as the database back end. The service now is available to any user with a browser.

Benefits

- Greatly expanded user base
- Richer information, better decisions
- Research on demand
- Easy-to-use interface
- Expandability for business growth

Technology Advisor Expands Customer Base, Deepens Offerings with Web-based Service

“Our potential user market has jumped from hundreds to tens of thousands. Not only are more people using our data service, but people are using it more frequently.”

Greg Buzek, President, IHL Consulting Group

IHL Consulting Group provides an information gold mine to technologists in retail companies and to technology vendors selling to retailers. Its data service contains more than 2.5 million data points on 2,500 retailers and restaurants—information such as the types of hardware, software, and services that these companies use. However, the original service required users to have a database running on their desktop computers, which limited use. With the help of Microsoft® partner Merasys, IHL designed Sophia, a Web-based offering built on Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 and SQL Server™ 2000. With this change, IHL has expanded its reach into its existing customer base by 800 percent, increased revenues, provided customers with more advanced query capabilities, removed growth constraints imposed by the previous database, and lowered the barrier of entry for new customers.



Situation

IHL Consulting Group is a research and advisory firm specializing in technologies for the retail and hospitality industries. The company, based in Franklin, Tennessee, generates timely data reports, offers advisory services, and serves as a retail technology spokesperson for industry and vendor events.

IHL customers are retailers and retail technology providers that want to better understand what's going on in the overall technology market or wish to identify specific equipment needs for a retailer or group of retailers. The consulting firm helps retailers and restaurants evaluate which technologies are working and which aren't before investing in them. Technology vendors use IHL services to discover market and partnership opportunities. IHL tracks not only technology but also key personnel at leading retailers, which helps vendors discover the correct contacts at prospective retail organizations.

Originally, IHL provided its business intelligence to customers on CDs that were updated quarterly. Later, IHL began to post new information to its Web site and send links to subscribers. In both cases, however, customers had to have the Microsoft® Access database installed on their desktop computers to use the IHL data service application. This was a problem, because the people most likely to use the database—sales and marketing personnel—were unlikely to have a database runtime engine on their computers.

Setting up new customers with the IHL application was cumbersome. While it took only five minutes to install the application, it took about an hour to train each user, which proved to be a strain on IHL resources and was bothersome for customers.

Also, issuing new versions of the application was time consuming. IHL distributed quarterly

update CDs and later file downloads but had to keep track of every individual in every customer company that used the product. "Every time we distributed an update to our system, it required two or three workdays on our end," says Greg Buzek, President of IHL Consulting Group. "This was a recurring resource drain that we wanted to eliminate."

Last but not least, the personal database foundation of the IHL application presented limitations on how much data IHL could add to its product. "Microsoft Access was not an enterprise database, and our service was bound by how much data and how many tables Access could hold," Buzek says. "If we wanted to stay out front competitively, we had to continue to expand our data depth, which required many more tables and queries to get targeted results."

Solution

A longtime Microsoft customer, IHL Consulting Group knew that it was time to move beyond the Microsoft desktop realm into Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software. IHL brought in Microsoft partner Merasys of Nashville, Tennessee, for counsel. Merasys confirmed that the Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system and SQL Server™ 2000 database, both part of Windows Server System, would form the perfect new foundation to help IHL take its services and business to the next level.

"We fielded quotes from several offshore development firms but felt uneasy about handing such a big project to people with whom we were unfamiliar," Buzek says. "We had personal contacts at Merasys and were impressed with their breadth of Microsoft knowledge and their plan for turning the IHL data service application into a Web-based offering."

“IHL Consulting Group has distilled an amazing amount of data on technology and retail into a single, easy-to-use tool.... Rapid information access is inexpensive and incredibly valuable.”

Cathy Hotka, Principal, Cathy Hotka and Associates

The Merasys proposal was to move the IHL data service application to a robust, expandable SQL Server 2000 database (SQL Server 2005 was still in beta development) hosted at IHL and give customers browser-based access. This redesign would relieve customers of the need to put a database runtime engine on every user's desktop, and it would relieve IHL of time-consuming CD/file distribution every time that it updated the product.

Quick Transformation to a Web-based Application

Merasys redesigned the data service application, which was christened Sophia, using the Microsoft .NET Framework, an integral component of the Windows® operating system that provides a programming model and runtime for Web services, Web applications, and smart client applications. Merasys also used the Microsoft Visual Studio® .NET 2003 development system, in particular the Microsoft Visual Basic® development system.

“We quickly transferred the 2.5 million-plus data points from Access and used SQL Server 2000 utilities to transform the data to the SQL Server environment,” says Justin Randall, Vice President of Merasys. “We took advantage of SQL Server Reporting Services for data presentation and were able to tightly integrate Reporting Services with our Web forms so that users had a seamless experience in submitting queries and viewing results.” Merasys took advantage of the Microsoft .NET forms-based authentication model to authenticate users signing in to Sophia.

Total development time was seven weeks for two developers. “Compared with a Java environment, .NET provides a far richer feature set to get the job done without building controls and switching to multiple languages,” Randall says. “The Microsoft-

based environment allows you to create a very intuitive user interface and sophisticated workflow. There was very little that we had to do outside the .NET environment.”

Retail Wisdom at User Fingertips

The new Web-based Sophia relieves customers of having to run a database component on each user's desktop computer; the user needs only a browser and logon credentials. Sophia provides insight into nearly 200 types of hardware, software, services, and key personnel for more than 2,500 retailers and restaurants. An enterprise subscription allows everyone in an organization to do competitive analyses, look up market share, create targeted mailing lists of key executives, and understand IT spending for an individual retailer or thousands of companies.

For example, a marketing manager might pose the following question to Sophia: “Give me a list of all chief executive officers, IT managers, and store operations personnel working for department stores that use IBM point-of-sale systems and have more than U.S.\$1 billion in sales.” The requester can specify whether the resulting list is presented by job title, sales, hardware, software, or services installed. Within seconds, Sophia gathers the appropriate data from the SQL Server 2000 database, and SQL Server Reporting Services presents it in a user-friendly format on screen. With another click, the user can output the results to the Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet software for further manipulation and analysis, or to XML, HTML, or PDF formats.

“I've been connecting technology companies and retail IT decision makers for a long time. IHL Consulting Group has distilled an amazing amount of data on technology and retail into a single, easy-to-use tool,” says Sophia user Cathy Hotka, Principal of Cathy Hotka and Associates. “Do you want to meet

Through the Web-based Sophia data access application, users can quickly find detailed IT spending information on all types of retailers.

CIOs [chief information officers] who are using a given technology? Want to learn what technology products great retailers have deployed? It's all here. Rapid information access is inexpensive and incredibly valuable."

Sophia, which currently includes data for North American retail/hospitality companies, contains more than 2.5 million data points. With its SQL Server 2000 foundation, IHL plans to expand Sophia data depth to 10 million data points by the end of 2006. "We're adding detail on software and hardware solutions and also taking IT spending information to the next level," Buzek says. "Instead of providing aggregate expenditure sums, we'll be able to add data for store systems, e-commerce systems, and other types of IT systems. We'll also be adding worldwide data, covering retailers and

restaurants all over the world."

Benefits

By transforming the Sophia data service from a CD-based desktop tool to a Web-based enterprise subscription, IHL Consulting Group has greatly expanded its customer base, reduced its product update costs, provided its customers with fresher and more extensive data, and removed business growth constraints.

Greatly Expanded User Base

Buzek estimates that converting Sophia to a Web-based service has expanded the IHL user base by an average of 800 percent. "At one customer organization, only two people previously used our product. But that figure leapt to twenty-three people when we moved Sophia to the Web," he says. "Our potential user market has jumped from hundreds to tens of thousands. Not only are more people using our data service, but people are using it more frequently. Users don't have to know anything about using a database; they simply need to be able to use a browser."

The expansion in users has resulted in increased revenues for IHL. "We've been able to dramatically increase our revenues per client while dramatically lowering the price that our customers have to pay to get similar results," Buzek says. "It's a win-win situation for everyone." For the typical IHL customer, the cost of external applications needed to access Sophia dropped from an average of \$500 per user to zero due to eliminating the need for a desktop database license for every user—and the associated need for training.

Richer Information Delivered Faster

With SQL Server 2000 as the back-end database, IHL has been able to deepen Sophia functionality. Customers now can do three-way and four-way database table joins whereas the earlier version allowed only two-way joins (unless the user was very adept

The screenshot shows the IHL Retailers Database web application. The browser title is "IHL Retailers Database - Microsoft Internet Explorer". The page has a navigation bar with links: Home, Research, Data Services, Advisory Services, Clients, About IHL, and Contact Us. The main content area is titled "MyIHL" and includes a sidebar with "Research Studies", "Sophia Data Access" (with sub-links: Quick ERP Profiles, Full Database Access, 1-minute Mailing List, 1-minute Query Builder, Full Access Profiles), "Account Profile" (with sub-links: User Information, Company Information), and "Logout". The main content area features several service tiles: "Solution Finder" (Find a technology solution specifically for your retail segment...), "QuickMarket Share" (Find vendor market share for specific retail technologies...), "1-minute Mailing List" (Use the filters to create a targeted mailing list...), "Retailer Profiles" (Use filters to generate company profiles...), and "Vendor Profiles" (Use filters to generate vendor profiles...).

“Complex queries used to take two to three hours; now they take less than a minute.”

Greg Buzek, President, IHL Consulting Group

at database use or writing custom code). For example, a customer could previously ask which retailers used a customer relationship management (CRM) application, linking the “retailer name” and “CRM software” tables. To delve deeper, the user would need to perform subsequent two-way queries and ask, “Which of these companies have sales of more than \$400 million?” and “Who are the CIOs of these companies?” Now, the customer can issue a single query: “Which retailers of \$400 million or higher in revenues use CRM software, and who are the CIOs of those companies?”

“It’s much faster for our customers,” Buzek says. “Before, they would have to submit the first query, output the results to a new table, submit a second query and build another table, and so on. Complex queries used to take two to three hours; now they take less than a minute. Having SQL Server 2000 on the back end makes Sophia query results much faster and the search more interactive. We can add far more data to our product to allow customers to do far deeper information searches.”

Data is also fresher because IHL can add new research data to its database more regularly without the hassle of distributing CDs and files. “I’d say that we are distributing new data 300 percent faster than before, giving customers faster access to the most recent industry data,” Buzek says. “We upload new data monthly instead of quarterly, and send e-mail announcements to let customers know that Sophia has new data. Moving to a Web-based model has allowed us to eliminate three to four weeks a year in software distribution and the associated costs.”

Research on Demand

The Web-based front end and SQL Server 2000-based back end allows IHL to deliver research on demand. The company creates approximately 15 syndicated research

reports each year and used to maintain separate mailing lists for each report, which was an administrative chore. Now, report recipients are maintained by permissions stored in Sophia; IHL uploads a report into the database, and everyone with permission for it receives a notifying mail automatically.

“Our reports were not getting distributed as broadly within a company as they should have been,” Buzek says. “Now we can register every user who needs a report and send a link automatically. It’s less work for us and more useful for our customers.”

Easy-to-Use Interface

The redesigned interface of Sophia is much more user friendly than the earlier version, which simplifies use and speeds customer productivity. Training has gone from about an hour to 10 minutes.

“Sophia now looks like an extension of Windows,” Buzek says. “We’ve seen an 80 percent improvement in the speed of creating targeted marketing campaigns thanks to the redesign. Customers are able to create targeted campaigns from their browsers and get it in the format that they need in less than a minute.” Users can easily move Sophia results to Microsoft Excel, HTML, or PDF formats, avoiding the time-consuming data mapping functions required in past versions.

Expandability for Business Growth

By using SQL Server 2000 as its data store, IHL has opened up considerable growth potential for itself. Today, Sophia contains more than 2.5 million data points but will expand to more than 10 million data points in 2006. “We feel that the depth of our data gives us a lead over other data services,” Buzek says. “SQL Server 2000 gives us plenty of growing room and allows us to add our analytical experience to the data for more intelligence, which will put us far ahead of everyone else out there.”

For More Information

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For more information about Merasys products and services, call (615) 469-5089 or visit the Web site at: www.merasys.com

For more information about IHL Consulting Group products and services, call (615) 591-2955 or visit the Web site at: www.ihlservices.com

IHL wants to offer more granular data so that customers can ask, for example, not only how much various retailers spend on IT in general but also which retailers spend more than \$500,000 on store systems. "Every time we add new search criteria we add more tables to the database query," Buzek says. "SQL Server handles it easily."

A key retailer-focused capability that IHL is adding to Sophia is called Solution Finder. It will enable retailers to look up technology solutions for specific needs. For example, a specialty retailer might need to replace its CRM system. Users can ask Sophia what the top 10 specialty stores are using for CRM as well as what the next five largest competing retailers in their region are using. The user can click through to the vendor names to get a profile of each, or click through on the retailer name to get a full technology profile on that competitor. Sophia even provides contact names and e-mail addresses for the specialty stores so that retailers can contact peers to ask how happy they are with the product. Solution Finder will help retailers find out how other retailers are solving common business problems.

"There's no limit to what we can do and how much we can grow with SQL Server powering Sophia," Buzek says. "We can grow the service with volumes more data and add our analytical and syndicated research elements. Sophia lets our customers use it any way they want."

Microsoft Windows Server System

Microsoft Windows Server System integrated server infrastructure software is designed to support end-to-end solutions built on Windows Server 2003. It creates an infrastructure based on integrated innovation, Microsoft's holistic approach to building products and solutions that are intrinsically designed to work together and interact seamlessly with other data and applications across your IT environment. This helps you reduce the costs of ongoing operations, deliver a more secure and reliable IT infrastructure, and drive valuable new capabilities for the future growth of your business.

For more information about Windows Server System, go to: www.microsoft.com/windowsserversystem

Software and Services

- Microsoft Windows Server System
 - Microsoft Windows Server 2003
 - Microsoft SQL Server 2000
- Microsoft Office
 - Microsoft Excel
- Microsoft Visual Studio
 - Microsoft Visual Basic .NET 2003
 - Microsoft Visual Studio .NET 2003

Technologies

- Microsoft .NET Framework
- Microsoft SQL Server Reporting Services

Partners

- Merasys

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