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Information
Builders

Customer Profile



FOCUS/EIS Tracks a \$ Billion Flower Business

What does a flowering hydrangea cost in Manhattan? How about a rose on the Via Veneto in Rome? A bunch of tulips on the Champs Elysées? A ficus plant in Tokyo?

The answer: It all depends. In fact, the cost of these plants frequently depends on when a button was pushed on the auction clocks of Aalsmeer, Holland. Every day, pricing for the lion's share of the flowers and plants sold all around the world is determined in this little village southwest of Amsterdam at the Aalsmeer Flower Auction – Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer (VBA). The auction is a true \$ billion market where Information Builders' FOCUS/EIS application plays an important part.

Snapshot

Organization: Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer (VBA) – Aalsmeer Flower Auction.

Profile: World's largest auction of flowers, indoor and outdoor plants.

Location: Aalsmeer, the Netherlands.

Objectives: Provide a single source of factual data for clients, owners, and staff.

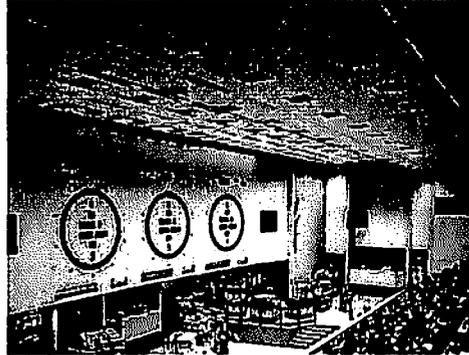
Why FOCUS/EIS: Clear and simple to use; provides insights quickly through data-driven drill-down displays and stoplights; works with existing Sybase systems.

Results: Users are already profiting from the fast and accurate information provided by FOCUS/EIS.

"The astronomical figures and fast-moving climate of the auction make Aalsmeer's information systems critical to everyone involved in this megabusiness."

"Green Gold" of the Netherlands

Almost 4 billion cut flowers, and indoor and outdoor plants are sold yearly in the Netherlands. Along with Holland's famous flower bulbs, these flowers and plants are an extremely important part of the Dutch balance of trade. The total value of these exports amounted to almost \$3.8 billion in 1993. Truly, they are green gold!



Of all cut flowers that are exported around the world, 59 percent come from the Netherlands – and almost half of this impressive total have passed the auction clocks of Aalsmeer, regardless of their origin or ultimate consumer. The same holds true for indoor plants, where the Netherlands leads the charts with 48 percent of the world total.

A cooperative association of growers owns the Aalsmeer flower auction, which is held in a giant complex that accommodates many companies and government institutions, including 350 wholesalers and exporters. Other permanent residents of the complex are forwarding agencies and transport services, KLM Airlines Cargo, and Dutch Customs and Plant Disease Control authorities.

50,000 Transactions Daily

The astronomical figures and fast-moving climate of the auction make Aalsmeer's information systems critical to everyone involved in this megabusiness. Heavy demands are placed on the Automation department at Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer and its realtime data repository, an Amdahl mainframe. Enormous amounts of auction and price data are entered and maintained on the mainframe – up to 50,000 transactions per day.

"There are about 650 PCs here," explained Jan Ratterman, Automation Manager. "In

the past, each user had part of the information in their hands. But as the business grew, more and more of our clients weren't able to handle the data we distributed," he continued. "More and more PC users asked for extra overviews of mainframe data, or they wanted to 'copy some files' for their own use.

"So we established a quick diskette service for current data and custom views. People

were constantly hustling to get current output files and datadisks for their PCs."

Accurate Information Desperately Needed

In the beginning, the diskette service more or less met users' needs. But, before long, this "Sneakerware" system started causing even more serious problems for Aalsmeer's owners and clients.

"The most serious problem," according to VBA's automation expert, "was that the data and views that clients requested were still ill-defined." As a result, the information that eventually was used for decision-making was either untrustworthy or simply missing. The growers had similar experiences when they tried to clarify information.

"It was almost a law that when two groups presented data on a certain subject, their data did not correspond," recalled Ratterman.

"In addition, several people started to build their own databases on PCs and networks, in order to have 'accurate' information available." All the individualized information sources distributed around Aalsmeer involved lots of double work and considerable costs.

The Solution: FOCUS/EIS

"Throughout 1992, some of our customers had a growing sense of unease," explained

Ron Tak, the consultant who served as chief information advisor in VBA's search for a solution. "Just at that time, many reviews appeared in the trade press about FOCUS/EIS as a management tool for looking at data in uniform ways and showing it graphically." So, Tak compared FOCUS/EIS with several other software solutions.

"We wanted a system that supported Sybase," Tak continued. "We tested the system with a 'heavy user' – the Transaction and Price Development Division. And we didn't do it on a management level, but at the staff level. Our experience with FOCUS/EIS was so favorable, we installed an operational system at the beginning of 1994."

FOCUS/EIS: "Everybody's Information System"

Aalsmeer's FOCUS/EIS system displays real-time data and is offered as an operational service that customers use on a subscription basis. Jan Ratterman gave the details, "We based our EIS on a Sun SPARCServer. It runs a Management Database, MGB, with a consistent dataset that we can control and safeguard. It provides operational information that subscribers can request on a cost-carrier basis.

"We talk about our EIS as 'everybody's information system,' and that's the way it actually works, too. Our customers, internal or external, can use FOCUS/EIS to examine information via customized tools called 'magnifying glasses.'"

Data-Driven Drill-Down And Alarms

Ratterman's "magnifying glasses" are the key aspect of the FOCUS/EIS concept. They enable users to display realtime management information on screen and give the user capabilities for drilling down into live data – in realtime – with programmable alarm functions to flag unexpected values and totals. These drill-down and alarm functions and the built-in graphical features of the EIS application all add up to a unique decision-making tool.

"It sounds a lot simpler than it is, by the way," said Ron Tak. For the development of VBA's "magnifying glass" EIS system, Tak chose to get all the required expertise in house, because of the complex nature of the flower business and Aalsmeer auctions.

"We had to develop the 'magnifying glasses' ourselves, with professional support from Information Builders," explained Ron. Years of experience with flower auctions had taught him that "you have to record data at several levels of aggregation. If you don't, it becomes too time-consuming for users to get their desired information from the system. At a right aggregation level, however, you get very fast response times for the data clients need."

Users Praise the Aalsmeer EIS System

The users of Aalsmeer's still-"fresh" FOCUS/EIS application are already sold on its power and usability. "It keeps me optimally informed," said Frans Kuipers, Aalsmeer's Director. "Actually I am a total non-computer person, very nontechnical. Yet even for me it turns out to be a great tool. It is very user-friendly and helps me prepare for all sorts of talks. I can find out everything I need to know about suppliers or buyers that come over to talk to me."

Director Kuipers praises the EIS system's power, too. "It gives me every fact I want to know about. The average price per species per specific period, turnover-incline or decline, you name it. The deeper you get into it, the more detailed your information gets. It's indispensable data, especially to support the strategic decisions we have to take."

"It keeps me optimally informed. It is very user-friendly... I can find out everything I need to know about suppliers or buyers that come over to talk to me."

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Customer Profile



ResourceNet International Transforms Financial Reporting With FOCUS Six EIS Edition

In today's competitive marketplace, decision makers need rapid access to enterprise-wide information, presented in ways that can be easily understood and acted upon. Every area of an enterprise can be adversely affected by inefficiencies in accessing, analyzing, and assimilating data.

ResourceNet International (RNI) is a prime example. "The challenge facing businesses today is not in collecting information, but in making that information available and presentable in a form that is meaningful," says Renee Farnham, Analyst for Executive Information Systems at RNI in Covington, Kentucky. "Organizations need reporting systems that can quickly access any data, on any platform, across the entire enterprise, and put it in a form that is suitable for executive presentation."

Snapshot

Organization: ResourceNet International (RNI).

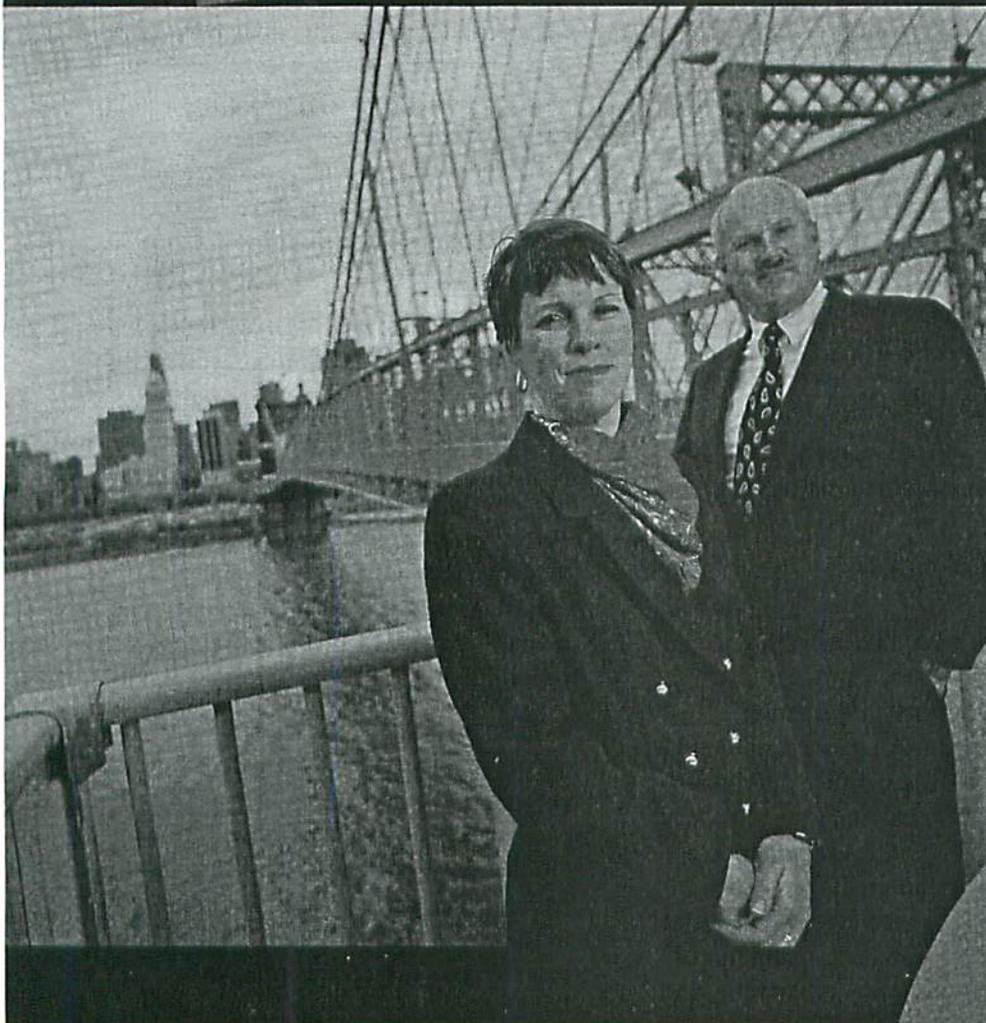
Profile: Distribution unit of International Paper, the world's largest paper company.

Headquarters: Covington, KY.

The Challenge: Create a single, efficient system for producing and distributing monthly financial reports.

Result: "Brainchild" Financial Reporting System.

Information Builders Tools: FOCUS Six EIS Edition.



"I was also very impressed with the overall FOCUS Six software products and their tight integration with the Windows environment."

The need for timely and accurate reporting was most pronounced in the financial management area of RNI. Last year, Farnham and colleague Dennis Williams rose to the challenge, using FOCUS Six EIS Edition to help their company make the ascent from basic financial reporting to complex information analysis, delivery, and presentation.

RNI is the distribution unit of International Paper, the world's largest paper company. With its own delivery fleet and nearly 300 distribution centers and stores, RNI distributes quality business products nationwide and to Mexico. Annual sales totaled \$5 billion in 1995, 23 percent of International Paper's total sales of \$19.8 billion. RNI's comprehensive product line includes printing papers, graphic arts equipment, industrial packaging supplies, food-service disposables, business products for copiers and computers, retail packaging, and much more. The philosophy at the company is to combine the familiarity and accessibility of a local company with the resources of an international supplier.

Order Out of Chaos

Sales performance, marketing projections, production reports, inventory positions, financial reports, stock transactions, price changes – almost any information managers need is sitting in a computer file somewhere in the enterprise. Executive Information Systems (EIS) were introduced to bring order out of this information chaos. Many ambitious EIS projects fail, however, because getting to this data and putting it together in meaningful forms remains a complex, time-consuming, and expensive process.

"To me, that's the success story in a nutshell," says Farnham. "We created our 'Brainchild' financial reporting system entirely with FOCUS Six EIS Edition and incurred no additional costs after the purchase of the software. You often hear horror stories about organizations buying a 'complete solution' for EIS, only to find they need additional software, run into

bugs, or get stuck with software that doesn't work as advertised."

Like most creations, "Brainchild" began with an idea born of need. RNI was beset with inefficiencies and a lack of commonality in producing and distributing monthly financial reports to each of its four main regions. Most reports were generated on the mainframe, printed, and distributed through the company's internal mail service to financial managers at headquarters and various regional divisions. Because of the inflexible nature of the process, some managers were creating home-grown reports using a variety of software tools and computers. "These reporting mechanisms were not only slow, but confusing, because everyone wasn't looking at the same information," Farnham says.

Dennis Williams, RNI's Manager of Systems, approached Farnham with a possible solution. "He said we needed to develop an EIS system for RNI," she recalls. "I remember my reaction: I didn't even know what EIS meant. My background was as a systems auditor. I had started with mainframe systems, and had some experience working with the AS/400, but my PC experience – including Windows – was minimal."

Williams explained the fundamentals of Executive Information Systems, convincing Farnham of their value to RNI. "I told her it was basically a win/win situation," he says. "Whatever we could add to our financial reporting was going to be an improvement. At the time, we didn't suspect just how much of an improvement it was going to be."

Quest for Tools

In early 1995, Williams and Farnham began their quest for EIS software that could combine easy application development with simplicity of use. "We didn't want to present our financial executives with a complex maze of statistical information," says Farnham. "We wanted to give them data in a simple, high-level format first, while allowing them to drill

down deeper into more complexity if they so chose."

Farnham and Williams looked at several EIS software packages, including Cognos' Powerplay and Impromptu, ComShare's Commander, Showcase Vista, and FOCUS Six EIS Edition, formerly called FOCUS EIS for Windows. "I chose FOCUS Six for a couple of reasons," Farnham states. "For one, we had been running FOCUS on the mainframe for more than 10 years and were familiar with its extensive capabilities. FOCUS reads almost any type of file and works on many types of platforms. I was also very impressed with the overall FOCUS Six software products and their tight integration with the Windows environment."

FOCUS Six EIS Edition is a versatile software package designed to remove the data access roadblocks that account for more than 90 percent of the cost of developing and implementing an Executive Information System. It provides robust information analysis capabilities and access to data resident on a wide range of operating platforms, from mainframe to PC. And it allows developers to join more than 60 database file structures, both relational and legacy. The process is completely transparent to end users. Building and deploying enterprise-level EIS applications can be accomplished in as little as 10 weeks.

FOCUS Six EIS Edition played well for the future, too. "We hadn't installed our AS/400 systems yet, but the acquisition was in the works," Farnham says. "By choosing FOCUS, we knew we could ensure compatibility with our many different platforms."

Information Builders' reputation for prompt and reliable technical support was also a key factor. "I was what you might call a raw novice when I began working with the FOCUS Six tools," laughs Farnham. "Information Builders' technical hotline was a crucial element in creating Brainchild. Fortunately, the product was extremely easy to learn."

Coming Alive

Farnham developed specifications for Brainchild in March 1995. In April, she installed the FOCUS EIS tools along with PC/FOCUS, now called FOCUS Six. Development proceeded quickly. "I had a very good prototype ready by June of that year," she recalls, "and we put on a demonstration of the prototype at a user conference that same month. Everybody got excited about the new EIS capabilities."

By September, Farnham was ready to go live with Brainchild. "It's pretty amazing when you think about it," she says. "There were just two of us. Dennis supplied the text files, while I started with a blank screen, a very limited knowledge of Windows, and no PC background. Yet we pulled it off in five months flat."

RNI has been growing at 75 percent annually since 1992 when International Paper decided to expand its small distribution unit in Covington. One of the reasons for its success was the decision to centralize distribution, while allowing its 275 companies to do what they do best: maintain costs and service customers.

"Centralizing functions such as distribution, inventory control, and marketing information made sense," says Farnham. "Brainchild is another step in that direction. It allows financial managers at each tier of the company to get a picture of the business they are responsible for, from the total RNI view down to how a particular store is doing."

The financial reports – which include income statements, balance sheets, statistical reports, operating expense reports, and sales analysis reports – give managers various levels of General Ledger information on a monthly basis. "The southern regional manager, for example, gets only the reports for his tier of responsibility, along with statements on each of the specific divisions within his region," says Farnham. "This allows for the greatest degree of security, while making sure that everyone gets the information they need to do good business."

"Managers can use FOCUS Six EIS Edition to analyze the data at their leisure, even at remote locations."

Brainchild Anatomy

Brainchild is a shining example of multi-platform information systems automation. Financial information from various sites is input into the company's AS/400-based J. D. Edwards General Ledger and Accounts Payable systems. From there, the data is sent to the mainframe, where another system closes out each month's financial data. Mainframe FOCUS is then used to generate month-end reports in textual format that are downloaded via Lotus cc:Mail to about 100 PCs on the local area network.

"Managers can use FOCUS Six EIS Edition to analyze the data at their leisure, even at remote locations," Farnham says. "The information populates the FOCUS directories I have established on each PC, then Brainchild accesses the files. It sounds mundane but it's quite spectacular: all of a sudden, they have these detailed financial statements and impressive graphics at point-and-click convenience."

Standing Upright

RNI management is giving rave reviews to the new EIS. They are particularly impressed with the ease with which they can access timely information. "Time savings are substantial," Williams stresses. "It used to take five to ten days after the close of a billing period to deliver financial reports to users. Now, users get that information the day after we close the period. Just printing all the reports and distributing them to all the various divisions used to be a two-day process. Now, we e-mail everything, which means it's nearly instantaneous."

Farnham is a great believer in the notion that the more fun you can make a computer system, the more likely it is that it will be used. This inspired her to create many interesting and lively features, such as a color-coded map of the U.S. from which users can quickly gauge the profitability of particular regions.

"When users sign on, a message appears that says, 'Welcome to Brainchild, Click Here to Begin Your Journey,'" she says. "If they're authorized, they'll see this map of all the regions, with little buttons on them indicating the headquarters of each region. If earnings before interest and taxes is higher than forecasted, the button will be green; if less than forecasted, it will be red. It takes just one glance. And it's dynamic, changing for each month, for each region."

All in all, it's been an impressive evolution. Brainchild has changed RNI's financial reporting from a set of divergent methods and reports on disparate systems to a centralized, uniform process across systems, all within a five-month period. The time it takes to access month-end financial data has been shortened from days to minutes. And yet the entire system was created by a single developer who had no previous experience with EIS.

Says Farnham, "When I compare the financial reporting situation before FOCUS EIS came on the scene to the simplicity and sophistication of our current reporting process, I have no doubt that the FOCUS Six products will continue to be valuable tools for many years to come." ❖

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Customer Profile



U.S. Postal Service Rides to the Future on FOCUS EIS

In March 1860, an advertisement appeared in newspapers in Missouri and California. The ad read, "Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be experienced riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred." It was the beginning of the short-lived but legendary Pony Express, which cut in half the time it took mail to travel across the harsh conditions of the overland route connecting the Eastern and Western portions of the United States.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) faces new challenges today, such as sophisticated competition from the private sector, globalization, and heightened customer expectations. But the determination to find speedier and more efficient ways to deliver the mail and manage costs remains strong.

Snapshot

Organization: United States Postal Service, Mid-Atlantic Area.

Profile: One of the 10 major USPS areas.

Headquarters: Arlington, Virginia.

The Challenge: Improve the area's financial and operations performance by obtaining better and quicker access to data, and providing better data-analysis capabilities.

Results: Far better data collecting and analysis system for monitoring financial and operations systems performance. Generated a high-profile awareness within the U.S. Postal Service.

Information Builders' Tools: FOCUS, FOCUS Six EIS Edition, and EDA.



"We saw that we could use EDA to do all the data translation necessary to join these diverse systems, and FOCUS EIS to present the information in a meaningful way."

It was with this innovative spirit that Jim Woodward, Finance Manager of USPS's Mid-Atlantic Area, and Steve Darragh, Senior Budget and Financial Analyst, sought to improve the ways they monitored and assessed their area's operating and financial performance. The solution Woodward and Darragh devised – and one that is rapidly spreading to other postal areas around the country – was constructed with Information Builders' FOCUS Six Executive Information System (EIS) and EDA software.

"The executive information system we have implemented will free up tens of thousands of hours and millions of dollars' worth of effort when adopted by all the Postal Service areas," says Woodward. "Rather than spend their time gathering data, our analysts can devote their time to analyzing it."

Mapping the Territory

The Mid-Atlantic Area, one of 10 areas in the Postal Service, is responsible for managing six "performance clusters" that together comprise more than 4,000 post offices, 30 distribution and processing plants, and numerous airmail facilities and encoding centers. It administers an annual budget of nearly \$4 billion.

All of the Postal Service's financial, delivery, and processing systems are linked via a wide-area network to a data center in San Mateo, California. Information on work hours, payroll, mail volumes, productivity measurements, and service performance is collected there on mainframe computers running the MVS operating system.

"We have hundreds of analysts in the Postal Service, each of whom spends eight hours per day, every day, gathering data and putting it into some kind of graphical format," says Woodward. "The challenge was to find a faster way to obtain detailed

data on financial and operating performances and productivity."

Before FOCUS EIS galloped onto the scene, the Mid-Atlantic Area's financial analysts accessed information manually, gathering data and writing individual reports to display it. Most of them downloaded information from Mainframe FOCUS files to Excel or Lotus spreadsheets on their PCs.

But there was little consistency in the ways analysts worked, and little flexibility in the types of data that could be accessed and combined.

"Data gathering and analysis was compromised by a system that did not allow analysts to

access high-level area data and cluster data on a single system," says Darragh. "Being able to drill down and get at that data was vital to our operations. We had to figure out how to combine corporate information with area information from as many as 10 different performance clusters."

Rounding Up the Data

That's when Steve Darragh recommended the FOCUS EIS reporting system and EDA data access technology.

"Steve came to me in mid-1996 with an idea for eliminating the manual data-gathering process and, at the same time, providing our analysts with an easy-to-use graphical user interface for all our systems," Woodward recalls. "He proposed acquiring FOCUS Six and FOCUS EIS for the job, and we flew with it."

FOCUS Six EIS Edition provides a way to gather and analyze data automatically and transparently in an open systems environment, eliminating the data access roadblocks that hamper the development of decision support systems. When used with EDA middleware, it enables seamless operation among widely diverse



applications, network protocols, operating systems, and databases.

"We saw that we could use EDA to do all the data translation necessary to join these diverse systems, and FOCUS EIS to present the information in a meaningful way," Darragh explains.

Working with consultants from Information Builders' Professional Services division, Darragh and his team created a cohesive, menu-based system for gathering and analyzing financial and operational performance data through an intuitive graphical user interface.

The consultants helped with the system design and initial screen layouts. They wrote custom data access and presentation routines to ensure consistency in how the data is rolled up, summarized, and presented. And they used the point-and-click development capabilities of the FOCUS EIS software to build a menu system for accessing many different types of reports.

"In about two months, Information Builders left and we were flying by ourselves," Darragh explains. "We've been on our own ever since, as we continue to enhance the system and implement it within other areas."

Improving Information Delivery

The Mid-Atlantic Area runs its EIS system on a Digital Prioris server running the Windows NT operating system. A wide-area network connects the Mid-Atlantic Area with the San Mateo mainframe. Source data, accessed via FTP over the WAN, is stored in Mainframe FOCUS databases.

"We used FOCUS EIS to create an intuitive menu system through which analysts could access performance and financial information from any of the clusters reporting to them," says Darragh. "FOCUS EIS eliminated the tedium and complexity of manual data-gathering. With more time devoted to analysis, we get a clearer, speedier, and more detailed picture of our operational and financial performance, right down to the individual post office level."

For example, analysts can track Priority Mail from processing site to processing site, and provide performance information to recommend changes. This helps the area increase productivity and bring its performance scores up.

"We can do hundreds of different things we weren't able to do before," Darragh exclaims. "We can monitor employees by type or classification, such as how many hours they've put in, how much overtime, and so forth. We can merge payroll data with employee data and get a very clear profile of what's happening out there with people, hours, and performance metrics."

The Mid-Atlantic Area's executive information system has earned impressive plaudits, all the way up to Postal Service headquarters in Washington, DC. Chief Financial Officer Mike Riley says the system has extraordinary value and that he would like to see it standardized throughout the Postal Service. Meanwhile, Mid-Atlantic Area Vice President Henry Pankey, who backed the EIS development effort, presented Darragh with the Area Vice President's Performance Award.

Heading West

But Darragh is not one to rest on his laurels. He is now hard at work helping other postal areas establish FOCUS-based executive information systems. "We haven't had to push FOCUS EIS at all," he says. "We simply show the Area Finance Managers what we've done, and they are immediately interested."

The desire to implement similar systems has mushroomed, starting in the East and moving West. "Half the other postal areas are already up and running with FOCUS EIS, and we have a backlog of queries about it from the remaining areas," Woodward says.

Darragh extols the ease of distribution and maintenance. "We're doing global changes on the mainframe from our area to their area," he explains. "Within each area, we set up a Prioris server running the FOCUS EIS and EDA software. I can configure their

"We've had outstanding results. We believed FOCUS EIS would require minimal risk and promise great returns. This turned out to be the case."

Windows NT systems right from my desktop using pcANYWHERE and FTP."

Darragh credits Information Builders' Professional Services division with helping them get started. "I'm a financial analyst, not a programmer," he says. "I had to do some training in both EDA and EIS, but Information Builders' consultants were right there, helping us design and develop the application. From this experience, I can say, 'If you have an understanding of FOCUS, you can surely move ahead with EIS and EDA.'"

While the old Pony Express is a fading – if glorious – memory, the new challenges facing the Postal Service are every bit as urgent and demanding. In the end,

Woodward, Darragh, and Pankey all agree that the greatest reward has been the ability to measure and improve customer service to the people of the United States.

"We've had outstanding results," Darragh acknowledges. "But then, we started with solid technology. We believed FOCUS EIS would require minimal risk and promise great returns. This turned out to be the case."

Woodward concurs. "Our bottom line is improving the quality of the Postal Service through a better and more comprehensive understanding of information," he concludes. "The Information Builders software is having a definite impact on our ability to do just that." ♦

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