

School District Provides Web-based Access to SAP R/3 Financial Data with SharePoint Portal Server

Published: June 2003

When Seattle Public Schools needed to provide senior management with self-service access to data contained in its SAP R/3 financial system, the school district turned to Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server. In less than two weeks, the district implemented a solution that uses SharePoint Portal Server and a SharePoint plug-in from ERP-Link to extract reports from SAP and present them to users through an intuitive Web-based interface. Taking this approach has enabled Seattle Public Schools to avoid purchasing SAP desktop licenses for users who only need to view data and to reduce training costs by eliminating the need to teach so many extra people how to use the SAP desktop client.

Situation

Seattle Public Schools is the largest school district in the state of Washington. The organization manages 102 schools, educates more than 48,000 students, and has close to 5,500 full time employees. The district's General Fund Budget for 2002–2003 is U.S.\$443 million.

In 2000, Seattle Public Schools replaced its mainframe-based financial system with a client/server SAP R/3 solution running on the Microsoft® Windows® operating system. Based on SAP R/3 version 4.6b, the solution comprises several SAP modules (Finance, Controlling, Materials Management, Project System, and Budget Management) and is used to manage all school district financial activities other than payroll. The system has roughly 600 end users, including 100 people in the school district's central administration facility and 2 or 3 people in each school.

Until recently, the only way for school district personnel to access SAP reports was through the application's desktop client. This limitation presented a challenge for Seattle Public Schools Business Systems Manager Tom McBroom, who needed a fast and cost-effective way to provide senior school district management with self-service access to key financial information. "We had to extend the data in SAP to management desktops but wanted to avoid purchasing additional client licenses for use by people that would only be viewing data," says McBroom. "Moreover, learning to use the SAP client requires several hours of training."



Solution Overview

Customer Profile

Seattle Public Schools is the largest school district in the state of Washington, with an annual budget of \$443 million.

Business Situation

The school district wanted to provide senior management with access to financial information without requiring them to install and learn the SAP desktop client.

Solution

The school district implemented a solution based on Microsoft® SharePoint™ Portal Server that provides Web-based access to SAP reports.

Benefits

- Implemented in less than two weeks
- Cost-effective—requires no additional SAP licenses
- Requires no end-user training
- Conserves SAP system resources
- Offers integrated security

Software and Services

Microsoft Windows® 2000 Server with Internet Information Services 5.0 and Active Directory®
Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server 2001

Hardware

Compaq ProLiant DL360-G2 server with 2 Pentium III 1.4 GHz processors and 1.25 GB of RAM

Partner

ERP-Link Corporation
(www.erp-link.com)



Solution

To address the challenge, McBroom deployed a solution based on Microsoft SharePoint™ Portal Server 2001 and ERP-Link Corporation's BizData for SAP (a SharePoint plug-in) that provides access to SAP reports through a Web browser. Selected school district administrators receive a weekly e-mail message containing a link to a custom-tailored SAP report that is retrieved from SAP by the BizData plug-in. Clicking the link takes the user to the SharePoint Web server and displays the report in the user's Web browser in the same familiar format as the district's printed SAP reports. "Upper management now has key financial data they need at their fingertips without having to install and learn the SAP client," says McBroom. "The solution is so effective and easy to use that its user base has already grown to three times the size we expected."

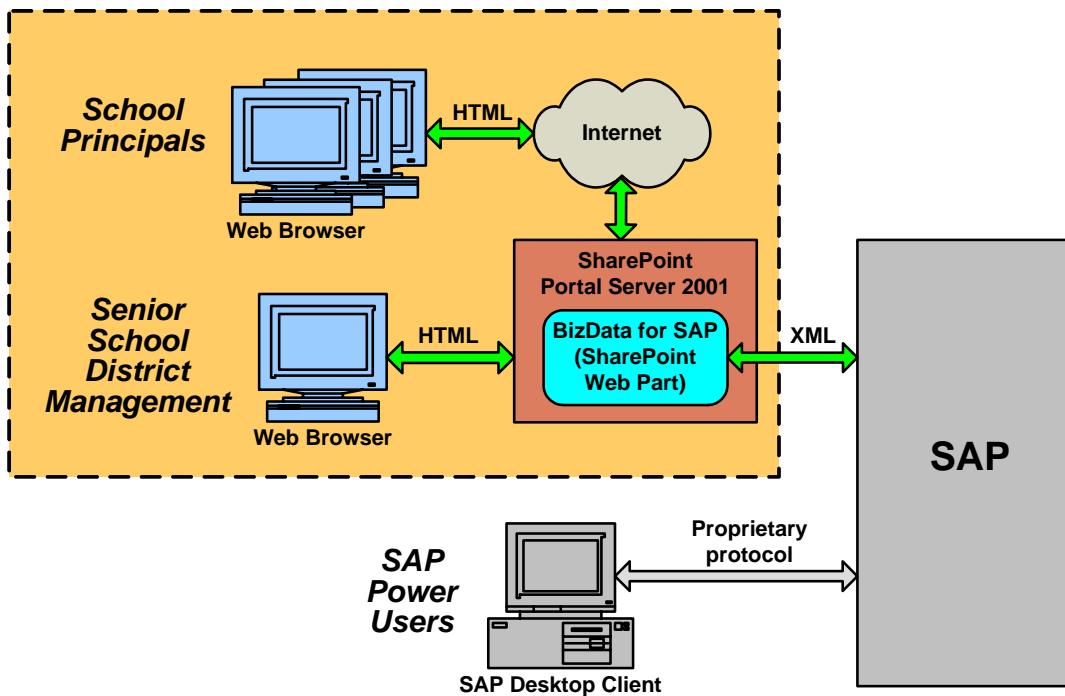
The response to the school district's new solution is so positive that McBroom's team is expanding use to service a new class of users: the district's 100-plus school principals. "Now that we're making life easier for upper management, we're extending the same benefits to the schools we serve," says McBroom. "We'll just create a new report with the information that individual schools need and let them access it over the Web."

How It Works

On a predefined basis, the BizData plug-in (implemented as a SharePoint Web Part) requests the desired financial report from SAP. SAP returns the report as an ASCII flat file, which BizData converts to an XML document with smart tags. Next, BizData applies an Extensible Stylesheet Language Transformation to the XML document to render the information as HTML. BizData then places the HTML file in the SharePoint Portal Server internal document store, where it is readily available for access through a Web browser.

"Our new SharePoint solution is working really well—everybody loves it. Management no longer needs to ask someone to run a report and wait until a paper printout is delivered. And my group is able to spend more time managing our business systems and less time extracting and delivering data."

Tom McBroom
Business Systems Manager
Seattle Public Schools



Based on SharePoint Portal Server, the school district's new solution provides access to financial information without requiring users to install and learn the SAP client.

Benefits

Selecting Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server 2001 and ERP-Link BizData for SAP enabled Seattle Public Schools to rapidly and cost-effectively put key financial information where it is most needed—at the fingertips of those people making financial decisions. Moving forward, additional reports can be created and easily distributed with no additional cost and little more effort than it takes to design a new SAP report.

“Our SharePoint Portal Server solution has been very well received—everybody loves it,” says McBroom. “Management no longer needs to ask someone to run a report and wait until a paper printout is delivered. And my group is able to spend more time managing our business systems and less time extracting and delivering data.”

Rapid Time-to-Market

Because no custom development was required, Seattle Public Schools was able to implement its new solution in less than two weeks. “The solution was practically Plug and Play,” says McBroom. “All we had to do was configure the SharePoint server, install the BizData plug-in, and point it to the newly created report in our SAP system. Had we tried to develop a solution from scratch, it would have taken several times as long and cost significantly more.”

Cost Effectiveness

With its new solution, the school district is providing broader access to SAP without having to purchase additional licenses for the application’s desktop client. “We manage our SAP licenses very closely; to go beyond the number we currently have would be very expensive,” says McBroom. “Our SharePoint solution was very cost-effective—quite easy to accommodate within our existing budget—and lets us save our precious SAP licenses for users who need to do more than just view data.”

No Training Required

Licensing fees aren’t the only cost that McBroom is avoiding. The new solution also is eliminating the need to train some new users on the SAP client. “In the past, we had one business analyst who spent a significant portion of her time traveling throughout the district and showing school principals how to get the data they need using the SAP client,” says McBroom. “By switching users who only need to view SAP data over to our SharePoint solution, which is entirely intuitive, we’ll significantly reduce the amount of training and handholding that needs to be done.”

Conservation of SAP System Resources

BizData conserves SAP system resources by running and extracting SAP reports in the evening, when the system is not heavily loaded. Moreover, because the HTML-formatted reports are cached by SharePoint, until overwritten by a new report, users can access the information as often as needed without placing any load on the SAP system.

SAP Data Easily Repurposed

BizData transforms SAP report program outputs into XML documents containing smart-tags and makes them available through SharePoint. With this framework in-place, users will be able to import SAP data directly into the next version of Microsoft Office—a capability that will let them easily perform further analysis and create custom reports.

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Integrated Role-based Security

By taking advantage of the seamless integration between SharePoint Portal Server and the Windows Active Directory® directory service, the school district is able to provide controlled access to reports through SharePoint without having to maintain a separate security mechanism. Reports are placed into one of three folders on the SharePoint server, with access to each folder controlled by the user's organizational role as defined in Active Directory. When a user tries to access a report, SharePoint authenticates the user against Active Directory, determines the user's role, checks the access control list for the directory containing the report, and grants or denies access accordingly.

Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server is a flexible portal solution that allows companies to easily find, share, and publish information.

For more information about SharePoint Portal Server, go to:
<http://www.microsoft.com/sharepoint/>

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to:
<http://www.microsoft.com/>

ERP-Link's BizData Suite for SAP R/3 is a set of intelligent extractors, connectors and runtime engines that enable proprietary SAP compound data objects to be accessed in real-time by other enterprise solutions. BizData exposes SAP Report Program Outputs, Business Documents/Forms and DB Query Sets as XML documents with smart tags, facilitating rapid integration with Web-based, real-time BI/OLAP, and e-business applications. For more information about ERP-Link products and services, visit the Web site at:
<http://www.erp-link.com/>

For more information about Seattle Public Schools, visit the Web site at:
<http://www.seattleschools.org/>

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