Netherlands Defense Force Merges More Than 50 Intranets in a Single Portal to Communicate Across all Service Branches

Executive Summary

CUSTOMER NAME
Netherlands Defense Force

INDUSTRY
Public Sector

BUSINESS CHALLENGES
- Unified Communications solutions for multinational, multiservice deployments
- Replace more than 50 heterogeneous intranets and improve content management
- Provide all parts of the defense organization with access to new shared services

SOLUTIONS
- Single portal permits common messaging and shared services across the organization
- Strategic advice on high-level program development and change management
- Roadmap for project visibility to build support and accelerate intranet adoption

BUSINESS RESULTS
- Improved communications efficiency combined with 80 percent cost reduction
- Single channel allows defense chiefs to address all personnel simultaneously
- Foundation for extension of common intranet to mobile defense staff

Faced with new military challenges and major cutbacks in both spending and manpower, the Dutch armed forces have undergone major restruction. A shared services approach to vital issues such as medical support, food supplies, and procurement is now available over a single channel, cutting across traditional service boundaries.

Business Challenges

The Dutch armed forces have changed their operational focus profoundly since the end of the Cold War. Today they are involved on the ground in Afghanistan or in peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia, rather than forming part of the NATO shield against the Soviet Union. They have added rapid deployment, drug enforcement, and urban warfare to their duty roster, sending out multiple service units and collaboration on projects with other countries. Terrorism has added another complex dimension.

While high-security operational communications were, and still are, handled separately, daily intranet traffic was spread over more than 50 separate networks. And, departmental information was frequently unstructured, filed in a confusing patchwork of silos with low levels of quality control. The number of documents stored by each department frequently exceeded 100,000. What was needed was a single, secure, standard model that could be applied across all parts of the organization.

In 2002, the Dutch government unveiled a program of cutbacks, which rose to roughly US$337 million a year by 2006. The program is due for completion between 2009 and 2010, entailing a 15 percent reduction in both military personnel and civilian staff, from 65,000 to about 55,000. To save money, the organization introduced a shared services model in areas such as medical treatment, food distribution, military equipment and supplies, all accessible over the new intranet.

Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG)

Solutions

The political imperative to create a stronger, common corporate identity across all the services was a major catalyst for the project. There were pressing practical issues, too. A solution was needed not only to encompass five established bodies—the Army, Navy, and Air Force (coded Green, Grey, and Blue), plus the Military Police and central staff—but also to embrace two shared service centers, both coded Purple. These bodies would enable military customers to access information on matters such as medical treatment, food, and military equipment, and communicate their needs.

Poor editorial control over existing content on multiple intranets had created pressure to ensure that all guidance on military regulations was up-to-date. The Cisco® Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) engaged with the 2 1/2-year project early on to help and advise on the best way to achieve these multiple objectives.

The first six months dealt with briefings on large-scale change management, and strategic discussion of how to obtain the full support of a wide range of stakeholders, spanning distinctive service traditions marked by historic rivalries. Project leader Major Ted Kolman accepted the view that such a multifaceted change-management project required early evidence of success to promote consensus.

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The team then sought buy-in from senior people in all departments; their support of the project would filter down the organization.

The team had instructions not to begin with a blank sheet. Having reviewed the options, with advice from IBSG, they chose the Air Force intranet as a model for the project as a whole. The Air Force had the most up-to-date intranet, offering a serviceable template for moving the project forward quickly without incurring higher development costs. Time and effort spent securing senior support in the other services would pay dividends further down the line.

The next step was to draw up a design, paying close attention to management issues and the need to incorporate business processes into the new networks. The project team commissioned a Dutch IT consultancy to evaluate the model for user-friendliness and functionality.

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> Project leader
> Netherlands Defense Force

Once the model was endorsed, the central department showcased the possibilities of the new intranet in a pilot. Staff were encouraged by the project team to speed up the launch. Because the background IT development work was already completed, the only major task was to select and review content for publication on the new network. The job was done manually to provide an overhaul of all material accessible over the new intranet.

Populated with fresh and compelling content, the intranet went live in March 2005 after just five months, less than a year since the project's inception. The early launch accelerated cooperation from other departments.

Five more intranets were migrated in parallel, including the Army, Navy, and Military Police, while the common portal was set up, offering direct access to applications used by individual departments. By mid-2007, the Air Force and shared service centers—which were already equipped with the most modern intranets and were, therefore, deemed in less-urgent need of transformation— were close to completion.

Business Results

Although the overriding objectives of the project were qualitative rather than cost-based, the Netherlands Defense Force intranet transformation project has created both significant savings and a new cost transparency. Under the previous system, it was almost impossible to arrive at a realistic figure for intranet costs because they were embedded in a jigsaw of discrete budgets. Today that is no longer the case. Kolman says the present cost is between $1 million and $1.3 million. Extrapolating from partial figures supplied by select managers, this amount is estimated at around one-fifth of the total cost of running separate systems.

Major news items posted on the homepage of the unified intranet are registering 40,000 hits a month, a figure that has remained steady, more or less, from the start. Assuming each hit represents a unique user, this means the new intranet is being used by up to two-thirds of all defense staff on a monthly basis. The project team also tracks the daily numbers, using links to common applications such as human resource functions. These too are stable, and the results are now being used to explore ideas on how to refine the use of a powerful new communications tool in the future.

With shared services due in mid-2007, the cost-saving expectations should be fully realized. The promise of intranet access for troops on deployment has been fulfilled in Afghanistan, where service personnel use intranet cafes, and plans are underway to provide access to the Defense Force intranet over the public Internet once security issues are resolved.

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Project Leader
Netherlands Defense Force

Defense chiefs were quick to notice the potential of the new intranet as an invaluable tool to comment on the rationale and progress of the wider reorganization. Improved situational awareness throughout the organization is a clear, qualitative benefit.

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Under the old system of multiple intranets, information filtered down through the ranks, with a risk of losing important messages in transition. Early confirmation of the success of the single defense intranet as a corporate tool came when the defense minister requested a column, linked to the homepage, after the commander-in-chief began publishing comments for a universal defense staff readership.

The project has achieved a ground-breaking level of editorial access to the content-management system, developed in conjunction with a Dutch content-management provider. It embraces more than 2,000 editors, more than any previous version of the system was able to handle. The unusually large number of editors, necessitating a new systems architecture, was designed to hold down the cost of managing the content by applying a "many-hands-make-light-work" approach, which is seen as appropriate during a time of cutbacks in defense spending.

A management system based on a "lynchpin" idea, positioning heads of individual service editorial boards on the departmental committee immediately above each editorial board in the decision-making hierarchy, ensures that once a single standard is set, it can easily be modified according to direct user feedback. The structure ensures free passage of ideas up and down the organization.

Originally, it had been proposed that the new intranet would provide access to the plethora of documentation previously reached over separate departmental intranets. The sheer volume and inefficient archiving of the material, however, rendered the idea unworkable. Because of this, the Defense Department is now able to address a document-management problem of which it was previously unaware. With the new intranet, slightly more than half the content was recycled and slightly less than half was created fresh. The process has allowed an overall quality improvement.

Next Steps

Extending access to mobile service personnel, such as officers and crew posted to foreign waters, is the next move. The main barriers, however, are the high cost of satellite bandwidth and potential security issues, but the department hopes to resolve these in the coming year. Levels of regular access to a PC or laptop for all personnel are being reviewed to ensure the widest possible distribution. Another possible development will be the addition of personalization to the portal—for instance, setting up personal calendars within the larger corporate space.

More Information

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