

Not-for-profit organization chooses M.R.S. Enterprise Consulting Services for their data management needs

M.R.S. Company Limited is an innovative IT Consulting and Application Development company that delivers bottom-line results by providing dynamic and integrated e-Business, Business Intelligence and Custom Application Development Solutions. M.R.S. provides a full range of consulting, project management and systems development services.

Founded in 1937, Foster Parents Plan of Canada is one of the oldest and most esteemed child sponsorship agencies. As a member of PLAN International, a child-focused development organization, Foster Parents Plan has been giving Canadians the opportunity to sponsor children and fund a variety of community-based programs in the developing world for more than 60 years.

Foster Parents Plan's innovative programming brings health care, education, access to clean water, housing, and micro credit to more than 42 countries. These initiatives are designed to make a lasting difference in the lives of children, their families and their communities. Thanks to the support of 90,000 Canadian Foster Parents, the organization is able to work side by side with communities as they grow, develop and build a brighter, more hopeful future for children.

Overcoming Challenges

For this Toronto-based not-for-profit organization, identifying new sponsors, mapping sponsors and children and working with Foster Parents Plan representatives in the field all fall within the scope of its mission. Understandably, this type of work generates an enormous quantity and variety of data. As such, Foster Parents Plan required a cost effective, easy to use, means of compiling, storing and analyzing this information.

Foster Parents Plan realized that its legacy IBM AS/400 technology infrastructure, on its own, might not be able to meet the organization's changing information needs. Kelvin Cantafio, chief information officer for Foster Parents Plan, explains, "While our AS/400 is great at taking in our operational data, it is often inefficient at outputting data for analysis purposes. Our departments need specific information on demand, and procuring it was becoming a challenge."

To better understand and react to a changing donor population, while maintaining the highest level of accountability, Foster Parents Plan required a new technology solution to access, streamline and scrutinize its information. The organization contacted M.R.S. Enterprise Consulting Services to help develop a solution that would meet these and other unique needs.

Developing New Relationships

From its headquarters in Mississauga, M.R.S. has been assisting its customers with the implementation of innovative and cost effective IT solutions for over two decades. As both a Microsoft Certified Gold Partner and an IBM Premier Business Partner, together with its depth and breadth of customer experience, Foster Parents Plan's choice of M.R.S. was easy.

The first step for M.R.S. was to understand the scope of Foster Parents Plan's requirement for faster and better access to information. The sources ranged from marketing to accounting to programming. Foster Parents Plan also required accurate and actionable data that was easy to understand and could provide them with a complete picture of the organization, which would help to facilitate the development of future strategies. There needed to be a capability of presenting the information graphically without requiring specialized skills.

Building a Solid Foundation

M.R.S. recommended a data warehouse solution to help Foster Parents Plan make the most of its data and ultimately shape the bottom line. To help the organization turn its data into knowledge, M.R.S. helped build the original Business Intelligence solution on a platform powered by Microsoft SQL Server 7.0 and Microsoft Windows NT 4.0. To make the desktop interface more inviting and user-friendly while providing Foster Parents Plan with a robust analysis application, M.R.S. deployed Cognos business intelligence tools.

In determining the scope of the project, Foster Parents Plan made sure that stakeholders from all areas of the organization discussed their needs with M.R.S. "Key decision-makers needed quick and easy access to critical information to allow them to make the most of our knowledge resources," Cantafio explains. "In order to make faster, more informed decisions, our managers required in-depth analysis and we discovered that a data warehouse is a perfect vehicle for this."

To set the stage for a proper data warehouse environment, while improving the overall quality of organizational data and ready it for use, M.R.S. had to first concentrate on thorough data cleansing.

Experience had taught M.R.S. that information from several different sources also came with different, incompatible formats. To do the intended work, it had to be transformed into a consistent style.

"Capturing information from multiple sources in a standard, error-proof way, then merging it with other information sources was a big - but necessary job. It is important to use clean and consolidated information in order to facilitate successful data warehousing," says Vice President, Sales and Business Development, Peter Christopoulos.

The solution has succeeded in revamping Foster Parents Plan's IT structure and delivering on a lot of promises. Christopoulos notes that, "This deployment has realized great results," he says. "Six months after we launched the pilot project using beta releases, business users were generating reports and analyzing information straight from the system. We are very pleased with how well it has improved and streamlined knowledge resources at Foster Parents Plan."

As Foster Parents Plan recently moved to a more customer-centric business model, the organization identified the need to handle larger data volumes and a wider range of data sources for their Data Warehouse and Business Intelligence Portal. M.R.S. determined that increasing storage capacity would resolve both of these issues and recommended upgrading the solution from SQL Server 7.0 to SQL Server 2000 and from Windows NT 4.0 to Windows 2000, in concert with a server upgrade. As a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner in Business Intelligence, M.R.S. was well positioned to implement the upgraded solution. As a result, cube build time shave been cut by two-thirds, allowing for increased data extraction and integration.

Reaping the Rewards

The data warehouse provides Foster Parents Plan with measurements of its activities that are easy to manipulate and analyze. The organization uses this data to identify opportunities and areas in need of improvement; it then determines if its strategies are a success. "We can see what's going on in our business and we are able to improve the way we operate," Cantafio says.

At Foster Parents Plan, Cantafio notes that, thanks to its intuitive data warehouse solution, users can get answers themselves that used to require IT intervention. "Users throughout our organization are benefiting from self-serve information; it has empowered users to build their own reports and answer their own questions, quickly and efficiently," he says.

Cantafio concludes, "By using real-time data to make real-time business decisions, we operate more efficiently and maximize resources for programs. Everyone agrees that the more nimble and responsive we are, the more we can send to the field, which ultimately supports our objectives."

The Foster Parents Plan data warehouse has received praise both inside and outside the organization, receiving a nomination for a Computerworld Smithsonian Award and winning a RealWare Award for the best data warehouse solution.

Foster Parents Plan continues to benefit from a close relationship with its technology partner, M.R.S. Leveraging M.R.S's data warehousing expertise from start to finish, Foster Parents Plan has found a powerful and easy to use vehicle to turn its business critical data into actionable knowledge, that is supporting the company in its mission to improve the lives of children, families and communities in the developing world.

All product and brand names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

For More Information

For more information about M.R.S. Enterprise Consulting Services, call (905) 602-1700 or email: info@mrscompany.com.

To access information via the World Wide Web, go to:

<http://www.fosterparentsplan.ca/>

<http://www.mrscompany.com/>