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## CyberEye

### Abilene leaves the '80s behind with integrated ERP system

As support for its mainframe dries up, city makes a quick transition to new suite

BY WILLIAM JACKSON | GCN STAFF

**ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO**, the city of Abilene, Texas, faced the choice of either updating or replacing its aging payroll and financial management systems, which dated to the late 1980s.

“They were not integrated,” said Ronnie C. Kidd, the city’s managing director for administration. “We had to build our own interfaces for them.”

It took the equivalent of more than two full-time employees to support the interfaces and keep the systems running. It also was getting hard to find parts for the mainframe that hosted the systems. “The hardware technology for the system is pretty much obsolete,” Kidd said.

The compelling factor, however, was that Cyborg Systems (now Accero) was ending support for the city’s Cyborg Payroll application. Rather than update a stovepipe, the city decided to replace the mainframe-based systems with an integrated suite of enterprise resource management tools geared to municipal needs. The city settled on a suite of tools from Lawson Software.

Information technology staff members finished the first phase of the implementation in December by bringing up the Human Capital Management system in just 16 weeks. “Payroll is up and running,” Kidd said.

Employee and management self-service applications for the rest of the HR management tool are being built. Implementation of the

financial management application began in February and is expected to be completed in October.

“We had a very assertive timeline for our payroll conversion,” Kidd said, driven by the fact that support for the old Cyborg system was ending. Setting up the new system required defining the positions and rolls associated with the jobs of 1,200 employees, and managing not only their paychecks, but their benefits, taxes and withholdings.

There was not much room for error, because it does not pay to make mistakes with workers’ payrolls.

“There is a tremendous hierarchy in the system that has to be built,” Kidd said. “It’s a very complex process.” But the demise of the old Cyborg system did not allow much leeway in getting a new payroll and HR system up and running.

The city’s organization and commitment were impressive, said Doug Ingram, industry strategic director for public sector at Lawson Software.

“We have had implementations that do not proceed as rapidly, to be kind,” Ingram said. “In Abilene they had extremely strong upper management support, strong project management and commitment from the HR team, so they were able to stand the implementation up in about a third of the time it can take.”

Abilene is a city of about 117,000 about 180 miles west of Dallas with an annual budget of \$156 million. Kidd said he began the search for new software to replace the aging systems in 2008. About a half-dozen companies re-

sponded to the city’s request for information, and these were quickly narrowed to two competitive vendors.

“There are not a whole lot of vendors that support the needs of a municipality,” Kidd said. Services such as police and fire departments have their own complex scheduling requirements under federal labor laws, and “not all HR systems support that.”

That is exactly why Lawson got into the market. Although it may not be a household name, the company today is the third-largest enterprise resource planning software vendor, behind SAP AG and Oracle. But 12 years ago the small company was having trouble competing in a crowded market.

“We needed to find some niche market in which we could compete,” Ingram said. The company first focused on health care and about eight years ago began concentrating on the public sector. “We don’t focus on the federal level and not much on the state level. Primarily it’s local and county government and K-through-12 schools.”

The municipal market had no dominant player, Ingram said, and it was characterized by aging technology a dozen years old or older that would quickly need to be replaced. The company developed three integrated ERP modules for municipalities:

- Human Capital Management, which handles everything from recruitment through onboarding, benefits management and training and development, in addition to payroll.

- Financial Management, which handles budget creation, daily transactions, accounts payable and receivable, grants and project management and reporting.

- Procurement, which handles sourcing and vendor management, the bidding process, requisitioning, inventory management and payments. This is integrated tightly with the financial management module.

When Abilene began looking, the Lawson suite was already being used by the cities of Arlington, Carrollton and Grand Prairie, three Dallas suburbs that make up the North Texas Council of Governments consortium. They had a single iteration of the software managed by a common IT group, but with a data environment for each city. After examining this implementation, Kidd said that picking Lawson was a clear decision.

"It was clear they could meet our needs," both in functionality and timing, he said. The

contract was signed in the summer of 2009 and implementation got under way. "We are very glad to be off the mainframe," Kidd said.

Employees can access their own data and find year-to-date information and make changes in status, such as the number of dependents in their families, and managers can look at work group information without calling HR.

"There is a lot of efficiency to be gained in having more streamlined access to information," Kidd said. "It's hard to put a dollar amount on it, but it will provide better management tools and better accounting"

An integrated, full HR system also can contribute to improved security, because the HR department often is the authoritative source for data used in enterprise identity management and access control. A workflow tool lets Abilene's IT department link with HR and use the data for assigning, provisioning and deprovisioning network access control privileges.

About five years ago, Lawson rewrote the security model in its Human Capital Management module to give administrators easier control over network access. In the old model, persons entered in the system had default access rights to everything that was not blocked. "In the new security model, you have rights to nothing and you are given rights based on your role in the organization," Ingram said.

Kidd said he sees potential for improved efficiencies in all of the management tools that will be implemented in Abilene.

"This solution will provide tools to help us strengthen our budget and HR management processes, improve workforce retention and manage federal, state and private grand processes that can bolster our finances," he said.

About the Author

*William Jackson is a senior writer for GCN and the author of the CyberEye column.*

## In searching for an ERP system, Abilene learned to challenge its vendors

BY WILLIAM JACKSON | GCN STAFF

When Abilene, Texas, was searching for a vendor to upgrade its financial and human resources management systems, the city first identified what it needed and then demanded it from its vendor.

The responsibility to find the right solution rests with both parties, said Ronnie Kidd, the city's managing director for administration.

"We tried to do a considerable amount of due diligence upfront," Kidd said. "It's important to take the time at the beginning of the search to identify what your needs are

and what you want to end up with."

At the same time, he said, "it's also important to challenge the vendors to make sure they can meet your needs."

One of the primary reasons Abilene chose Lawson Software to provide an integrated suite of enterprise resource management tools was the company's willingness to work with the city to meet its needs and accommodate an aggressive schedule for implementing a human resources and payroll system.

"Lawson actually enhanced their product to meet our needs," Kidd said. "That was a

win-win. I think it made the product better and it met our needs."

The city also committed itself to making the transition work, dedicating IT and human resources teams to the process of implementing a new system as the existing system approached its end of life. "You've got to keep your eyes wide open and enter the process knowing that it is a complex and complicated thing," Kidd said.

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*William Jackson is a senior writer for GCN and the author of the CyberEye column.*

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