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## PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AUTOMATION — AN OpenAir CASE STUDY

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**P**SA to professional service-based organizations is like ERP (enterprise resource planning) is to distributors and manufacturers. ERP provides an integrated solution to meet all the system needs of product companies.

PSA provides an integrated solution to meet all the operational needs of professional service organizations such as accountants, consultants or engineers — any company that tracks time and manages projects.

PSA is an ideal application for the Internet. Employees can enter their time and expenses anywhere or anytime, providing real-time status reports for project managers. Some vendors also offer their solutions through the Application Services Provider (ASP) model. This means that you don't buy the software, you rent it; and the program and data are maintained on the ASP's equipment.

The primary advantage of an ASP is less investment in computers and the resources to maintain it.

ASP and PSA seem to go together (notice that ASP is PSA spelled backwards), but many companies will opt to run their system on their own machines and maintain their program and data themselves.

Another advantage is that the vendor performs all upgrades on the ASP computers so customers are always on the latest version of the system.

**Situation:** Founded in 1994 by Catharine Devlin, Toronto/New York City-based Devlin is one of the leading interface design and development firms in North America. Their expertise includes interface design, back-end development, and usability testing.

Their existing Filemaker Pro system was holding them back and needed to be replaced. Devlin's 25 employees use both MACs and PCs.

**Objectives:** Devlin wanted their

employees to have online access to the system anywhere or anytime to enter their time or manage their projects.

They did not want a "Web-enabled" product, but rather one that was built and optimized for Internet Explorer or Netscape. There are many products that are Web-enabled allowing them to be used over the Internet — but there is an additional layer of infrastructure required. Many well-known and popular systems use Citrix to provide Internet access using Internet Explorer or Netscape.

Devlin did not want the additional expense of hardware, software (for the application server/computer and for each workstation), maintenance and administration associated with Citrix. For 25 employees, a Citrix solution could add \$10,000 to \$15,000 to the cost of the system.

**Solution:** Last year, Devlin selected OpenAir after reviewing only a small number of other products.

Last year, there wasn't a lot to choose from that met Devlin's functionality requirements and their budget. OpenAir's system includes project estimating, resource management, timesheets, expense reporting, project management, contact management, invoicing, purchase orders, knowledge management and two-way integration with Microsoft Project.

OpenAir, which started operations over three years ago with their Boston office, has about 700 clients worldwide with over 50 in Canada. Most of these clients, including Devlin, have taken the ASP option. Companies can also purchase their product pre-loaded on a server so they can host and maintain it themselves.

**Challenges:** OpenAir does not include accounting, but it does have integration with many accounting systems including QuickBooks, ACCPAC, Intact, Microsoft Great

Plains, and Oracle Financials. Devlin currently does its invoicing directly from OpenAir, but its plan is to integrate QuickBooks with OpenAir when Devlin upgrades their MAC operating system to the recently released OSX.

Integration will include synchronizing account information such as customers, jobs and vendors between QuickBooks and OpenAir, and importing accounts payable and accounts receivable information such as invoices and expense reports from OpenAir into QuickBooks.

Many companies worry about security with an ASP because the data and application reside on the ASP's computers. Concerns, which have grown with the demise of a number of high profile ASP's last year include unauthorized access to company information and service interruption if there is a network or hardware problem at the ASP. However, an ASP may in fact offer better security, data protection and application accessibility than most companies that don't have state-of-the-art technology or appropriate technical resources.

OpenAir is primarily a developer of software and not in the ASP business. The company has selected one of the leading enterprise Web hosting companies, Exodus, to host their system — although all software maintenance is the responsibility of OpenAir.

The Exodus site is a restricted facility, and is guarded 24/7 by security professionals. The site also includes multiple firewalls, load-balancing technology and redundant communication lines to help ensure that their clients' data is available. Hardware is equipped with redundant drives and power supplies, and they maintain backup hardware and parts on site. They also conduct multiple daily tape backups.

Clients can download their data at any time, or have OpenAir periodically deliver their data in a password-protected WinZIP file through

their Automatic Backup Service.

Exodus uses redundant power supply through reliance on multiple power grids and diesel generators. OpenAir states that unscheduled downtime on their system has been less than .005 per cent over the last 18 months.

Another potential concern is the speed and reliability of the Internet. However reliable and high speed Internet access has become the norm and not the exception in many cities across Canada.

Devlin is happy with the performance and the reliability of their Internet connections at their office in Toronto reporting fast access 95 per cent of the time.

The few times that high speed access was not available, performance was adequate over a dial-up connection. Dial up would only be appropriate for limited usage of the system.

Many companies face a challenge in the implementation of a new system. OpenAir spent three days at Devlin in training and converting Devlin's data from the old system. At the end of two weeks, Devlin had completed the implementation and the system was being used by all the employees. Most users required minimal training. Only the data administrator required more extensive knowledge of OpenAir.

Often reports need to be customized in many implementations. Devlin was able to generate all the reports they needed without customization including employee utilization and project profitability.

OpenAir also offers customization in custom fields, changing terminology and hundreds of options that can be turned on or off.

**Costs:** OpenAir pricing depends on the functionality purchased, the size of the customer, and the length of commitment. The list price is \$75 US per user per month for the entire PSA solution or \$20 US for just the

time and expense solution. OpenAir discounts this price for companies that sign annual contracts or qualify for volume discounts.

**Benefits:** Devlin has achieved their objectives in giving their employees access to the system anywhere or anytime.

Other benefits include generating reports that used to take 20 minutes, which now take under one minute. Invoices are generated when a phase or project is complete rather than at the end of the week with the old system.

The invoices are all sent out by e-mail without any complaint by clients. Devlin is confident that utilization has improved with the new system.

This would be true for any PSA product where utilization reports are generated. Knowing that peers and managers will know about utilization is an incentive to improve it. Devlin also thinks that project profitability has improved because of better reporting and being able to look at history before estimating on new projects.

**Conclusion:** Catharine Devlin has been happy with OpenAir from the beginning. She was hard pressed to find anything negative to say about OpenAir.

The hype is over. Web-based systems are now a reality and offer compelling advantages to traditional systems. OpenAir was one of the first to offer Web-based systems.

Every software developer, that has more than a three-year plan, should be working on their Web-based version or their systems will suffer the same fate met by software companies that did not switch from DOS to Windows.

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