

# ***SELF-SERVICE APPLICATIONS: EXTENDING THE EMPLOYEE HELPDESK***

By Lowell Luis

## **INDUSTRY TRENDS**

The mainstreaming of the Internet brings two very important factors to the forefront. First, the explosive demand for bandwidth and the commensurate drop in cost, driven primarily by the data-transmission needs of the Internet, enables centralized application deployment. Second, the perceived requirement for businesses of every size to become e-commerce-enabled will require new back- and front-office applications, thus opening the door to different application models, including enterprise resource planning software and its next-generation cousin, self-service applications.

In the area of enterprise applications, Lawson Software has been a market leader in web-enabled innovation and function since 1996, sharing this position with SAP. It is a particular favorite of the health care industry, with more than 400 healthcare customers as of this writing. In the areas of strategic functionality and global HR/payroll functionality, it is capturing incremental market share from PeopleSoft; both are considered the tier 1 HR/payroll vendors in the industry.

Lawson's early move to the Internet was of particular value for the HR product because of market interest in self-service solutions. The most pervasive kind of self-service

application remains self-service HR. For example, an employee can check his or her paycheck history and W4-s, modify direct-deposit instructions and adjust voluntary deductions. These functions alone may be the most expensive processes---they are labor intensive, and involve a lot of paper shuffling and telephone calls.

## **WEB-ENABLEMENT**

Web-enabling an enterprise application extends core, mission-critical functions onto the web while retaining the strength of the enterprise application, which is streamlining and integrating complex business processes. In the world of human resources, benefits, and payroll administration, self service applications are tools that let employees across dozens of locations access their pay stub and human resource data, among other tasks, and offloading requests formerly handled by the human resources department.

The transfer of non-core functions from the HR department to the hands of employees using on-line technology significantly reduces costs. It relieves the HR department from providing tactical services like data-entry and look-up and allows them to focus on more strategic initiatives like employee retention, training, and counseling.

The benefits of web-enablement are not limited to organizations that administer benefits and payroll in-house. Even companies who choose to outsource non-core functions to professional employer organizations (PEO) can reap its reward---provided the PEO offers an internet portal.

One company, Administaff (NYSE:ASF) provides comprehensive Personnel Management systems, including benefits and payroll administration, health and workers' compensation insurance programs, personnel records management, etc. Its

employee service center is a web-based portal that offers transaction convenience and information exchange, including personal finance and insurance services.

Another company, New York based Ambrose Group, provides comprehensive human resource services that include payroll and administration for other companies, which is supported by a web-based technology platform. This integrated platform leverages Lawson technology and provides the turnkey needs of small and mid-sized companies. Using its version of Lawson Self-Evident Applications, its client companies perform the following tasks:

- Employees can access benefits information through a website, including flexible spending account balances, dependent information, health plan summary description and current benefit plan selections stated above. Employees can also make changes to their benefits information in the event of a life status change or during open enrollment.
- In addition to online enrollments, employees can access and change their personal data whenever necessary. They can view and print their benefit summaries, view the company employment manual, and modify their personal information such as addresses or emergency contacts.
- Authorized client managers can initiate personnel action and change employee setup (department, office location, pay plans, etc.) in real time. In addition, managers may directly obtain detailed information about individual employees, including payments, direct deposit

information, benefits set-up, census information, etc.

- Client managers with appropriate security clearance can access standardized and customized reports of company data. These reports, which are generated in real-time directly from the database, can vary according to client need.

### **LAWSON SELF-EVIDENT APPLICATIONS**

With today's technology, information can be delivered, entered and maintained throughout the entire corporation via the web. In this regard, Lawson pioneered the deployment of application functionality in a "self-evident" metaphor, leveraging the intuitive browser-based paradigm of the internet. Basic functionality (e.g. Employee Change of Address) of interest to large numbers of users is delivered in the Self Service Centers. This user interface is intended to require zero training and be as intuitive as navigating any web site. The Self Service Centers are "roles based" and take on the look of an internet portal. The Information Office is the core of the applications and may be personalized to deliver client-specific roles and functions by user. These roles and functions may include Lawson application functionality as well as links to other sites internal and external to an organization.

Among the benefits which flow from widening the interactive audience of corporate information are:

- Reduced paper and work flow by eliminating intermediate steps in the data collection process.
- Eliminate the intermediate person needed to respond to information

- requests by employees, vendors, and suppliers.
- Corporate data will be more accurate since the person entering the data has the most knowledge of that data.
  - Eventually, the elimination of heads-down data entry. This will save costs, reduce the errors in the data, and free-up computer resources by spreading the workload over time.

To Lawson, self-service applications must be easy to navigate. The point and click hyper-link model used by the web is an excellent navigational model for its SEA. Whereas conventional client-server applications are forms-driven, self-evident applications are information driven. Instead of adapting to the computer, the computer should adapt to our job, which is the gathering of information, the analysis of that information and our reaction to that information.

#### *Employee and Manager Self-Service Center*

Employee Self Service will provide the ability for employees to apply for positions, answer routine benefit and payroll questions, update personal information for life events and participate in open enrollment.

Manager Self Service provides managers the ability to inquire upon employee information, perform employee reviews and personnel actions.

#### *SEA Finance and Accounting*

e-Payables provides vendors with access to payment information. e-Vendor Invoices allows suppliers to electronically receive information on the status of their invoices.

#### *SEA Requisitions*

This process allows organizations to extend the requisitioning process to all users that have access to the web. e-Requisitions provide full access to inquiries, product information, and historical data.

#### *SEA Open Component Extensions for JavaScript tools*

Lawson's Report Designer lets users design row-and-column reports, run them, and publish them, so that they are available to other users through the web.

With Chart Designer, they can create a graphic representation of data in a database table, organized by a category available in the same table.

Form Designer can be used to create forms that display and update data.

In all cases, users do not have to know program code or scripting languages.

### **TECHNICAL ARCHITECTURE**

Self-service applications are based on a web-centric, distributed object-computing model. This architecture offers the flexibility of deploying the application components to exploit the Internet delivery model. It is designed to significantly reduce bandwidth requirements and remote deployment requirements and significantly improve system scalability. A complete web-based solution typically consists of the following:

#### *Enterprise Server Components*

The typical components of the server applications are the Netscape Enterprise

Web Server, LOGAN™ Shared Library Services, Active Object Repository, Application Objects, Enterprise Database Server, and the SQL 7.0 RDBMS engine.

The Netscape Enterprise Web Server is used simply as the web engine to deliver the ActiveX forms and Information Office portal to the client browser. Security is enforced by the web server (on a named user basis) as well as the application security model. SSL (Secure Socket Layer) security will be employed to ensure secure communications across the internet.

#### *Client Interface*

The client component of the solution, or user-interface, is completely web-deployed. The client paradigm takes on two distinct forms, the Lawson ActiveX Desktop and the SEA (Self Evident Applications) Self Service Centers.

The ActiveX Desktop is the method of deploying all of the application functionality to the core, back-office type users of the applications. The application forms reside on the server as .OCX objects and are rendered on the client workstation in the Internet Explorer 5.0 browser. The .OCX objects are downloaded to the client workstation on demand and remain in cache for frequently used forms. The complete user interface metaphor of IE 5.0 is available for the users to personalize their use of the applications, including Favorites Folders. Frequently used forms and applications may be stored and organized by each user in the IE Favorites, providing them with a “custom workspace”.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Companies would do well to relieve college-educated HR staff from performing payroll and benefits inquiries that can be performed by employees themselves. By the same token, accounting staff could function more efficiently if non-accounting managers have easy access to reports they typically would not be able to run.

To manage the costs described above, companies sometimes outsource their HR, benefits, or payroll departments. These companies are usually small- to medium-sized businesses of 100 to 500 employees. In the U.S., these businesses represent more than 99% of all employers. They see the service model as the means to get up and running quickly.

For mature companies, however, outsourcing is no longer policy. In this case, self-service applications are one of the very few options for reducing the costs of an employee helpdesk. At the same time, self-service applications that attach to a company's enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems provide the benefits of front- and back-office integration. Information technology costs would be reduced if ERP vendors already provide the gateway to their database back-end. Lawson's three-tier architecture is virtually plug-n-play on the Web.

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