

Xerox DocuShare helps information fly at Sil-Mid Ltd



In the aerospace industry, strict safety guidelines mean that there is a legal obligation for aerospace suppliers and manufacturers to maintain a large and up-to-date library of safety-related product information. For these suppliers and manufacturers, storing and retrieving such vast quantities of paper-based documents poses a real problem.

This was an issue faced by Birmingham based Sil-Mid Ltd., a leading supplier of adhesives, lubricants and other chemicals for the aerospace industry. Today, Xerox's DocuShare is helping Sil-Mid to store and retrieve technical datasheets electronically, as well as enabling Sil-Mid to offer its customers even better service, by making it easier for them to access the documents they need, when they need them.

Paper, paper, everywhere...

Like all aerospace-supplies companies, Sil-Mid is obliged to provide its customers with product-related technical safety datasheets and other information, on demand. In Sil-Mid's case, that covers a 20 year period as Sil-Mid has been in the industry for over two decades. In that time, it has made hundreds of products available to its customers, requiring a room full of filing cabinets to hold all the associated documents. This doesn't just cause a storage issue, but a resource burden, too; in some cases, Sil-Mid customers buy hundreds of products and each must always be supplied with



their associated datasheets. As some datasheets can be up to 12 pages long, the dedicated customer-facing staff employed to find, retrieve, copy and either mail or fax out datasheets as and when requested, are challenged with a time consuming and laborious task.

Moreover, by law, companies like Sil-Mid are not allowed to charge for the provision of safety information, and have to bear the high administrative costs of this essential service themselves.

A self-service solution

That resource-demanding scenario was true until 2000, when Sil-Mid management decided that the company needed to simplify processes and significantly reduce costs in this area.

An electronic system to manage the documents was deemed the most suitable solution, combined with the added ability for customers to remotely access the required documents.

For more information on Sil-Mid, please visit www.silmid.com

For more information on Xerox DocuShare, please visit <http://docushare.xerox.com>

For more information on Xerox DocuShare in Northern Europe, please contact
Tel: +44 (0) 1753 704932

For more information on Xerox DocuShare in Southern Europe, please contact
Tel: +33 (0) 4 76 61 41 29

In the U.K, you may also contact Gemini Resourcing Ltd.
Tel: +44 124 97 00630) or visit <http://www.gemini-resourcing.com>

Therefore, a number of solutions were investigated, including document management systems. But with many starting at around £30,000 for the software alone, these proved too expensive for an SME like Sil-Mid.

Furthermore, most of those solutions were client/server-based, calling for client software to be installed to enable customers to access documents themselves. This is an impractical proposition given that Sil-Mid has over 5,000 customers, many of which are based in far-flung locations across the globe.

One of the exceptions was Xerox DocuShare software that, as an affordable document management system, more closely matched Sil-Mid's requirements. Additionally, the Xerox software features a Web-based client interface, so no extra software other than an Internet browser is required at the customer end. And, because DocuShare incorporates an easy-to-use search engine, customers can quickly and easily find and retrieve documents themselves, eliminating the need to burden Sil-Mid staff with copying, faxing and mailing out information.

According to Andy Nickson, Sil-Mid's CIO, a specialised tool like Xerox DocuShare is much more valuable to Sil-Mid than a traditional solution. "As an SME, we simply couldn't afford to go down the usual software route," explained Nickson, "But, by using a product like Xerox DocuShare, we can offer an essential and professional service to all our customers, including blue-chip corporates, for free."

Organic rollout

Document retrieval and Self-service registration were seen as key advantages of Xerox's DocuShare. So too was the ability to deploy the software in-house in a gradual manner. "We didn't want the disruption or expense of a once-and-for-all shift to the new system," said Nickson. "Plus, by law, we still have to keep paper copies of everything."

Working on the basis that it needed to capture the most requested documents first, the company therefore set-up a scanner in the same room as the document library. Every time a datasheet was retrieved, it was also scanned and added to the DocuShare system.

Electronic documentation in the form of PDFs was also supplied by manufacturers and other suppliers and incorporated into the DocuShare system.

This scanning process continued for over two years with the end result being that the company now provides customers with secure online access to all its technical and safety documents.

Business benefit

The DocuShare system runs on industry-standard PC hardware enabling Sil-Mid to host the service itself. It requires just one person to manage it, although the work involved is minimal. On average, around 40 new documents are added every day and these are batched and scanned together, making day-to-day administration very much a part-time activity.

DocuShare enables Sil-Mid to easily provide external users outside of its corporate directory to access their required documents. With more than 50 customers now accessing the DocuShare site every day, this has helped the company to make considerable savings in fax and mailing costs - but that's not the main benefit. "We don't just reduce costs," Nickson commented, "through DocuShare's convenience and ease of use, it adds value to the service we offer our customers, setting us apart from other suppliers in the market." The DocuShare service provided by Sil-Mid is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Continued development

Sil-Mid is very pleased with the Xerox DocuShare system, and it recently upgraded to the latest DocuShare software. As well as featuring improvements in performance, it adds a number of new features that have enabled Sil-Mid to further enhance its documentation service.

For example, the user interface has been given a more modern look and feel and made even easier to use. This is an enhancement that Sil-Mid used as part of its ongoing marketing programme, leveraging the new look and feel to generate incremental business.

The search engine has also been improved, making it easier for customers to find the data they want. To illustrate the advantages of this, a new customer recently requested 50 safety datasheets; under the old regime prior to DocuShare, it would have taken hours to retrieve, copy and fax the material to the customer. Instead, the customer was registered for online access and, using DocuShare, was able to locate and retrieve the documents themselves in just a few minutes.

With the latest software Sil-Mid can also customise the interface according to who is logging on, presenting custom branding and tailored features specific to the customer involved. It has also begun storing its own certificates of conformity and purchase invoices in the DocuShare database, and is looking at other uses of the system.

Despite a \$5 million turnover, Sil-Mid is a relatively small company by aerospace standards but with its online electronic documentation service, it is viewed by the industry as both a technology innovator and a role model for other companies.

"The value we get from Xerox DocuShare is fantastic," is how Andy Nickson sums it up. "And it's a value that we can add to the core products and services we provide to our customers."

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