



Industry

Public sector

Business Issue

Make a secure and flexible portal Web site that is the most important source of economic information

Solution

The Ecodata solution developed with SAS® software offers a flexible and fast system that every user can easily adapt to his needs

Benefits

Internal information customers receive excellent service and use Ecodata as a kind of "information portal" - Higher level of service to the public enhances the FPS's image



"In the context of providing services, we have set ourselves the target of making the website at the FPS Ministry of Economic Affairs the most important source of economic information in Belgium. And we have achieved this aim within just a few years."

Frank De Saer

Director ICT at the FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy

The Power to Know®

FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy Developing into a central supplier of essential economic information

The mentality of the public authorities has developed greatly in recent years, where the man or woman in the street is increasingly being treated as a "customer". As a result, the various departments are adapting their structures and working methods to make them more "customer-oriented" so that these customers can be given assistance more quickly and efficiently. The FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy has been making a significant effort in this area for a number of years. The Ecodata project developed with the help of SAS solutions is a case in point.

The Challenge

In the context of providing information services, the FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy set itself the target of making a portal website that would be the most important source of essential economic information in Belgium. The portal should offer a combination of complete confidentiality for the data, as well as to provide the greatest possible flexibility when consulting the site, with many drill-down possibilities.

The Solution

The Ecodata solution developed with SAS software allowed the FPS to offer a flexible and fast system that each user can easily adapt to his needs.

The Benefits

While the advantages of the Ecodata database for the public are obvious, the FPS itself also reaps immediate benefits from its investments: internal information customers receive excellent service, while they can use the Ecodata database as a kind of "information portal" higher level of service to the public enhances the FPS's image know-how on setting up an information portal is developed.

Increasingly high demands for the distribution of information

As far as a public authority is concerned, a customer can take many forms. Usually it is a citizen, business or institution looking for reliable information. For Frank De Saer, Director ICT at the FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy, the role of a distributor of information is a new and important challenge for the FPS: "Our customers — the ones who ask for economic information — are forever making higher demands when it comes to the dissemination of information: they need to get their hands very quickly on comprehensive, error-free and up-to-date economic information that they require for their decision-making processes. In the context of providing services, we have set ourselves the target of making the website at the FPS the most important source of economic information in Belgium. And we have achieved this aim within just a few years."

The FPS already has a very long tradition in distributing printed publications dealing with topics of every kind, and in recent years, a great deal of information has been available at the website. But according to Mr De Saer, this conceals a major disadvantage, because it is always standardised information. "We wanted to gear ourselves more closely to the individual needs of the public by creating a business database. Which is why in 1997 we set up the Ecodata macro-economic database, which is a tool that both manages the information as well as making on-line access possible."

ECODATA: the macro-economic database

The ICT-Administration wants to use the "Ecodata" database to make quantitative data about the Belgian economy in its European and worldwide context available to the public at large.

During 2000, the database was expanded significantly in volume. The input of data by existing and new internal and external information providers (National Bank of Belgium, European Commission, National Institute of Statistics, Planning Bureau, State Unemployment Office etc.) has been automated still further. These bodies now send in the figures requested electronically on a regular basis. The level of detail for consulting this database was also enhanced considerably in 2001. A very successful tool was added in 2003: users can take out a subscription for certain information: in doing so, they are informed by e-mail when information that is of importance for them is updated at the site. Initially, Ecodata operated mainly as an information system within the Department. A web version was also developed using the latest computer technology. In a subsequent stage, the end-user will be able to generate certain tables without having to programme them in.

Flexibility and reliability

The Ecodata database was first tested within the FPS in an intranet before the site was made accessible for larger groups. Every effort has been made to create a combination of complete confidentiality for the data, as well as to provide the greatest possible flexibility when consulting the site. The FPS also ensures compliance with all of the restrictions imposed by the information

providers and by the legislation governing privacy and the use of databases.

"It was our aim to allow users to create the mix they wanted for the data they were looking for. Anyone interested in the development of meat prices in Belgium can combine that information with movements in the export of Belgian meat," explains Mr De Saer.

In doing so, users can define and combine hundreds of time periods. They also have some very powerful tools for a drill-down, for example: How many foreigners are employed in Belgium? How many of them are French? What Belgian provinces, districts and boroughs are they located in? Users can also retrieve multi-dimensional statistics, such as data for imports, exports and the balance of foreign trade.

A solid partner with a proven solution

The FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy would like the Ecodata database to be fully customer-driven. Users can already personalise a great many elements of the database — even the colour of the screens! Yet management of the information needs to remain very straightforward in view of the fact that the database is designed for use by a broad audience. The input and output of data has also been automated to a large extent. "We also imposed very high requirements on other areas of the solution," says Dierk Op't Eynde, ICT data warehouse responsible FPS Economy. "One of these

requirements was that we wanted to make things as easy as possible for our providers of information. For example, that means that the National Bank sends through its data to us in its own format, from its own systems, without having to bother with additional processing."

The database also contains many Gigabytes of information and yet has to remain operating in a rapid and flexible manner. "The Administration had already had 15 years of outstanding experience with SAS," says Mr Op't Eynde. "In view of the complexity of the project, we used SAS software to produce an end-to-end solution for the Ecodata database. This was designed to deal with converting all of the incoming information into a single format, as well as managing the database and making the information available for people to consult via the Internet."

"The speed of the Ecodata solution is remarkable on account of the high degree of automation. To take an example, barely half an hour after the publication of consumer prices, they can already be consulted in their detailed entirety at our website — and users can even carry out a drill-down into the data!". And, as mentioned above, dozens of users (like press agencies) are informed by a personalized e-mail when information that is of importance for them is updated at the site.



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