



M-Files Success Stories 2009

Eliminating Steps in Accounts Payable with M-Files

Growing transport company links scanned invoices to its billing software, cutting out paper – and manual tasks out of the process

Many times introducing an electronic document management system (EDMS) into office workflow turns out to be an unpopular move, since it requires employees to do even more steps to do the same task. Systems Analyst Tim Decker used some of his programming ingenuity – along with the flexible M-Files platform – to streamline his company's accounts payable process.



Decker works for Great Lakes Petroleum Transportation, which moves various fuels from sources in throughout Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, New Mexico, and Texas. According to Decker, the 37-year-old trucking outfit has experienced more than fivefold growth since 2005, multiplying its fleet to 78 trucks. As the miles of road increased, so did the paper trail in the Alma, Michigan office.

“The most problematic area was accounts payable,” says Decker. “Because we own so many trucks, the biggest paperwork generation comes from part suppliers or outsourced mechanics. For instance, we spend thousands of dollars a month just on tires alone. Like a lot of growing companies, the old paper method of keeping all invoices in one filing cabinet was becoming quite a problem.”

Investigating AP processes, Decker found a severe disconnect with filed paperwork and electronic accounting entries in the transportation accounting software. “We were continually losing invoices. We’d enter one into the system, but two weeks later when we cut the check, we couldn’t find where we filed the original,” Decker explains. The new flood of paperwork was matched with confused procedures among the growing number of employees. Decker knew Great Lakes Trans needed a more comprehensive document management tool that would enforce its own rules of workflow.

Starting in August 2007, Decker spent more than a year researching file management solutions, sampling as many as 25 different software packages. He settled on two that fit with his organization's needs. One package was more than ten times the price of the other -- which made the final decision easy. Decker picked the simple, flexible, and affordable document management software M-Files.

M-Files for accounting

M-Files is an all-purpose flexible system that integrates directly into Microsoft Windows and supports any Windows applications. Rather than relying on file paths to locate



documents, M-Files identifies files through descriptive properties or fields known as metadata. When saving a file, a user tags the document with a few key metadata terms, instead of just selecting a file name and folder location.

This very simple change provides a powerfully efficient solution to keep every kind of business document in proper order. Retrieval is fast and precise, with no risk of mistakenly accessing an out of date version of a file or inadvertently creating duplicate files in different folder locations.

New users can begin effective filing processes right after installing M-Files, by easily assigning which required tags, or metadata properties, for certain types of recurring documents. Many companies take this customization further by interfacing M-Files with existing company databases so that metadata fields in M-Files can be populated with other important company data, such as a customer in a CRM system, or a product or stock number in an ERP system.

Motive Systems, the developer of M-Files, offers helpful technical services to customize M-Files to solve specific workflow problems. But Decker, as a programmer, chose to do it himself. With a few scripts using the M-Files API, he could create a seamless workflow of accounts payable information from start to finish.

“I started with the free download for M-Files Express to make sure it would integrate well with our existing backend, which is SQL-based. I am very familiar with Visual Basic and SQL, so I was comfortable I could get the API to work with M-Files. I found a demonstration on the M-Files website which showed how to connect to M-Files using their provided API through Excel and a full Visual Basic application. I was able to use both to connect to my M-Files vault and retrieve files for viewing or data for export into my backend system.”

Merging M-Files with AP automatically

Decker had the accounting staff scan the hardcopy invoices into M-Files. To identify each, Decker set up a script that does double duty. The metadata attributes added when saving the scan in M-Files are automatically sent to create a billing software entry.

“The key for making it feasible for everyday use was to eliminate steps in the process, rather than creating another round of data input,” says Decker. “Because of the integration, when employees save a scanned invoice in M-Files, all of the fields

that they fill out are exactly the same fields that they would have filled out for an AP entry in our accounting software. When the record is created, it automatically returns a voucher number from our accounting package and attaches a reference number field on that M-Files invoice. At any point after that, I can query either in the accounting software or the M-Files vault, and pull up both the accounting entry and the invoice image.”

Employees need only scan and enter the billing data once, when received. When it comes time to sign checks, Decker’s process eliminates the need to manually pull 50-100 invoices and paperclip them to their corresponding payments.

“With the new system, we can bypass that step entirely,” he says. “The signer receives the stack of printed checks and can simply type in the check number into M-Files, and see the invoice on screen. Now they don’t have to wait to pull those invoices manually at all.”

Expanding use across the organization

“Absolutely, M-Files has given us command over office workflow, especially with AP, and it has since expanded to other areas,” says Decker, who has applied M-Files to electronically archive other information that has been problematic in the past, such as truck and driver safety and compliance forms, that tend to overwhelm the office with paperwork. Decker has shared some of his techniques in the M-Files user forum, at www.mfilescommunity.com.

“We’re saving time, especially in AP, because we don’t lose things like before, and staff members don’t have to pull an invoice from a file cabinet to get a check approved,” concludes Decker. “And when a customer calls with a problem, we don’t have to look through old files in storage across the street. We can pull it up in a few seconds. If you know what the customer specifically wants, you just have to do a search.”

Overall, M-Files has proved to be the ultimate flexible platform to digitize workflow processes. “It was straightforward to extend M-Files from Accounts Payable to other tasks,” says Decker, “M-Files is very easy for the employees to use. Everybody seems to like it, and I find it easy to maintain. There is really nothing to it once you get it set up.”

About Great Lakes Petroleum Transportation

Great Lakes Petroleum Transportation, LLC is engaged in the transport of wholesale and retail petroleum products for major oil companies with service throughout Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana and most recently they have entered the crude oil transportation market in Texas, New Mexico and their home state of Michigan. Headquartered in Alma, Michigan, Great Lakes Petroleum Transportation operates equipment centers located in 25 major cities in five states. For more information, please visit: www.greatlakestrans.com.