



Collaboration Experts Develop Award-Winning Online Solution, Revenue Grows 40 Percent

Overview

Country or Region: United Kingdom

Industry: Professional services

Partner Profile

Based in Tyne and Wear, England, 4Projects offers Web-based, project-focused collaboration solutions to more than 130,000 users working on tens of thousands of active projects spanning six continents.

Business Situation

4Projects saw the need for a project and content management solution that would allow geographically dispersed users from different companies to collaborate easily on a variety of complex projects.

Solution

4Projects used the software-plus-services approach to develop a Web-based solution that easily integrates with existing on-premises applications, providing unlimited document storage to limitless users.

Benefits

- Enhanced efficiency
- Increased time savings
- Reduced costs
- Predictable revenue

“With the software-plus-services approach, we’ve been profitable since 2001 and our revenue continues to grow at a steady rate of 40 percent each year.”

Duncan Mactear, Marketing Director, 4Projects

Effective collaboration and efficient document management are essential to the success of any project, especially during times of economic uncertainty. 4Projects—a leader in the field of project collaboration solutions—saw an increasing need for a new kind of collaboration and content management strategy. The company developed 4Projects, a Web-based solution built using the Microsoft® SQL Server® 2005 Enterprise Edition data management software and the Windows Server® 2003 operating system. Customers, such as Waitrose supermarkets, use the solution to share documents, expedite review and approval processes, and archive completed projects for future reference. Using the software-plus-services approach, 4Projects generates consistent monthly revenue for itself, while helping its customers reduce costs, save time, and mitigate risk.

The logo for Waitrose, featuring the word 'Waitrose' in a green, lowercase, sans-serif font.

The Microsoft logo, featuring the word 'Microsoft' in a bold, black, sans-serif font with a registered trademark symbol.

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Situation

Founded in 2000, 4Projects quickly established itself as a leader in the provision of Web-based project collaboration solutions. The company, a Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner, effectively blends its in-depth understanding of project-driven industries—such as the construction, engineering, and property management sectors—with a wealth of business acumen and IT knowledge.

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“Companies were looking for a solution to help them standardize the way they delivered complex projects—from inception, feasibility, and design to procurement, construction, and post-construction. We wanted to offer a solution that would make it possible for our customers to reduce risk and complete their work more quickly.”

Traditionally, construction firms generate thousands of documents during the lifecycle of a project—all of which are sent as e-mail attachments or printed and hand-delivered to consultants and subcontractors. “The problem with this system is that businesses have no way of knowing whether or not their subcontractors are working with the latest information or most recent versions of drawings,” explains Ross McLaren, Account Manager at 4Projects. “For example, the electrical consultants could be working on a background architectural plan, only to discover that the information they’re using is out of date. This type of inefficiency adds up quickly and can become quite costly.”

Solution

From the beginning, 4Projects focused on developing an affordable solution that would enable users in geographically dispersed locations—and from within disparate companies—to efficiently collaborate on projects. “A solution that relies on a customer’s internal IT system is problematic because external collaborators typically are not allowed access beyond the firewall and into the network,” says Nick Graham, Product Development Manager at 4Projects. “We decided to use multi-tenant architecture to develop our collaboration solution and deliver it using software-plus-services.”

4Projects hosts its solution in ISO 27001 accredited hosting centers equipped with quad-socket, dual-core Dell PowerEdge 6850 x64 server computers running the Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 Enterprise Edition data management software and the Windows Server® 2003 Enterprise Edition operating system (see Figure 1). The system currently houses 6.13 terabytes of data and processes an average of 5,900 transactions per second, or 8 million transactions per day.

With the software-plus-services approach, customers access the 4Projects solution directly through the Internet (4Projects recommends using Windows® Internet Explorer® Internet browser, version 6 or higher). The company also offers a Web services interface, developed using the Windows Communication Foundation programming framework, that allows customers to integrate their existing on-premises applications or in-house document management systems with the 4Projects solution. This enables customers to automate certain internal business processes, such as synchronizing data or creating backups. 4Projects also used Web

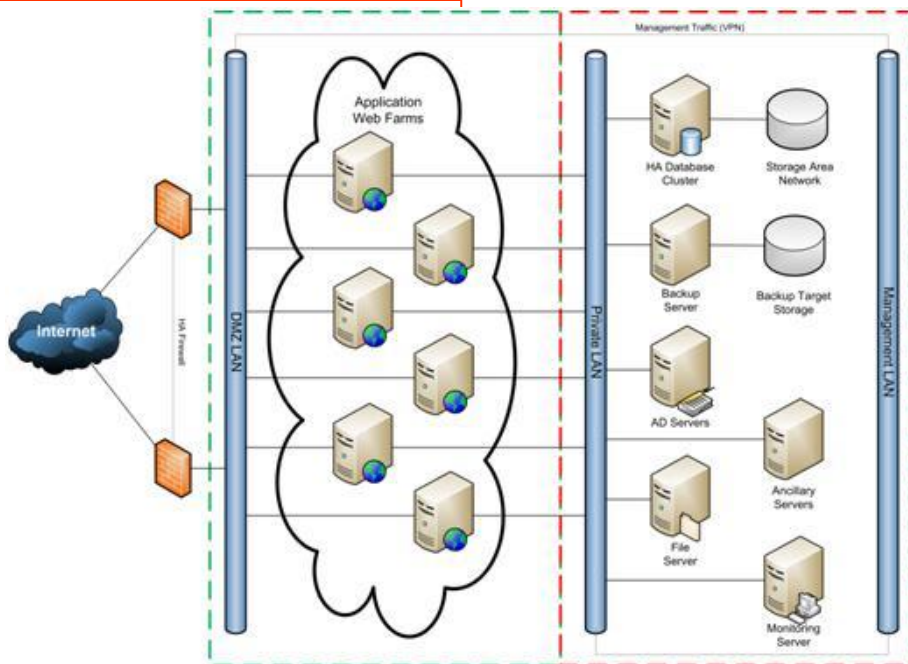
services to create an optional desktop client that provides a richer user experience than the Internet connection alone—users can synchronize folders on their desktops, or drag information off of their desktops and drop it into the Windows Internet Explorer window, where it automatically uploads into the 4Projects system.

“With software-plus-services, our customers don’t need to download or install anything to use the solution—it’s all on demand through Internet Explorer,” Graham says. “Our customers do not incur any upfront capital costs—no software licenses, hardware costs, or IT expenses—and can easily integrate the solution with their existing legacy systems. For a monthly subscription fee, we offer unlimited data storage and unlimited users—we encourage our customers to collaborate by allowing them to invite as many users they want onto the system. These are selling points over our competition.”

Whether through the desktop client or a browser, users easily upload the latest project information to the 4Projects solution. Those documents, drawings, and specifications automatically become available to every member of the project team, and the information can be accessed anytime and from anywhere with an Internet connection. “The amount of information that’s uploaded is always approximately one-tenth of the amount that’s downloaded,” says Graham. “This proves that the system works. Rather than attaching a 10-megabyte drawing to an e-mail message and sending it to 10 people, creating 100 megabytes of storage in the recipients’ e-mail servers, our customers simply upload one 10-megabyte file onto the 4Projects solution. This file can subsequently be downloaded by an unlimited number of collaborators whenever they need it.”

Waitrose, the supermarket division of retailer the John Lewis Partnership, has used the 4Projects solution since 2002. During that time, Waitrose has opened more than 60 new branches across the United Kingdom and plans to continue to increase the size of its business. “In order to meet our expansion goals, we need an absolutely efficient system of collaboration,” says Martin Hitchcock, General Manager of Feasibility Development for Waitrose. “There’s no way we could achieve the dramatic growth that we’ve experienced by relying on paper drawings and e-mail attachments. With the 4Projects solution, we have immediate access to the latest information, the system is intuitive and easy to use, and there’s no limit to the number of people we can add or the amount of data we can store on the system.”

Figure 1: The 4Projects technology stack includes Microsoft SQL Server 2005 Enterprise Edition, Windows Server 2003 Enterprise Edition, and Hitachi Storage Area Network.



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Benefits

Using the software-plus-services strategy, 4Projects has quickly become a recognized leader in Web-based project management solutions. In 2006 and 2007, 4Projects received the prestigious E-Commerce Product of the Year Award from Construction Computing magazine, and, in 2008, the company received the magazine’s award for Best Document and Content Management Solution for the 4Projects solution.

4Projects currently supports tens of thousands of active projects and more than 130,000 active users—with approximately 300 new users added each week. In order to survive in a turbulent economic climate, businesses are turning to the 4Projects solution to help them reduce costs by increasing efficiency. Not only does this software-plus-services approach benefit customers with time and cost savings, but the monthly subscription model also provides 4Projects with a predictable revenue stream.

Increased Efficiency Generates Time Savings

In the construction industry, contractors assemble “work packages”—a collection of information related to a particular aspect of the project. “When workers go out to the job site, they need to know that they’re referencing the most up-to-date work packages,” says Graham. “With the 4Projects solution, they automatically have access to the most current information so there’s no duplication of effort or wasted time.” Many 4Projects customers report a 40 percent improvement in their ability to find and retrieve accurate information.

Hitchcock adds, “The solution also includes a full audit trail. Everything is automatically tracked, so project teams can know when specific files are accessed or make sure that

architects are reading the most current drawings. They also use it to review and approve revisions. This not only increases efficiency, it also helps to mitigate risk.”

Customers can also use the 4Projects solution to capture, store, and replicate knowledge from one project to the next. Completed projects are stored in the archive section of the solution where the information can be accessed in a read-only format. “For example, if Waitrose discovers a layout for the aisles that works particularly well, the architects can easily replicate that design in subsequent stores,” says Mactear. “Instead of starting from scratch, Waitrose can access generic store plans which are used to brief Developers and Architects.” Waitrose estimates that, by using the 4Projects solution, the whole project team has reduced the amount of man hours spent on searching for the latest revision of drawings.

Web-Based Solution Slashes Costs

Because the 4Projects solution is accessed through the Internet, startup and infrastructure investments are minimal. “I think the software-plus-services approach makes life a lot easier for chief procurement officers and chief information officers,” Graham says. “They don’t have to worry about maintaining hardware, updating operating systems, or training IT staff—all of the additional resources that would be necessary if they purchased an on-premises solution. If they opt for a software-plus-services solution such as 4Projects, all they need is a Web browser. And with Web services, we can offer seamless integration with existing on-premises application or in-house document management systems.”

Mactear adds, “Not only do our customers save money upfront on capital outlay, but we spread the cost of the solution over the

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entire duration of the project. More and more customers are turning to 4Projects because the payment structure is so affordable and includes all the latest upgrades. With software-plus-services, customers pay their monthly subscription, and automatically receive regular updates and new features.”

Users of the 4Projects solution also save money on administrative costs such as printing, photocopying, postage, and courier fees. “Prior to 4Projects, we would use thousands of pieces of paper for each project,” says Hitchcock. “Now because everything is online, we are making major efficiency gains.”

By uploading documents to 4Projects rather than sending them as e-mail attachments (see Figure 2), users of the 4Projects solution have reduced the amount of e-mail server storage space by at least 45 gigabytes per week, which translates into an annual savings of approximately U.S.\$117,000.

Monthly Fee Generates Predictable Revenue

Beginning in 2001, after only one year in business, 4Projects has consistently generated a profit. “For us, the true benefit of the software-plus-services strategy is predictable revenue,” Mactear concludes. “This is extremely important, especially during times of economic uncertainty. We charge on a monthly basis, so we actually know what our minimum revenue will be for the next fiscal year. With the software-plus-services approach, we’ve been profitable since 2001 and our revenue continues to grow at a steady rate of 40 percent each year.”

Predictable revenue has also provided 4Projects with the opportunity to expand its business into additional project-related industries and other vertical markets. As part of its strategic expansion 4Projects now also serves the Natural Resources and Retail sectors.

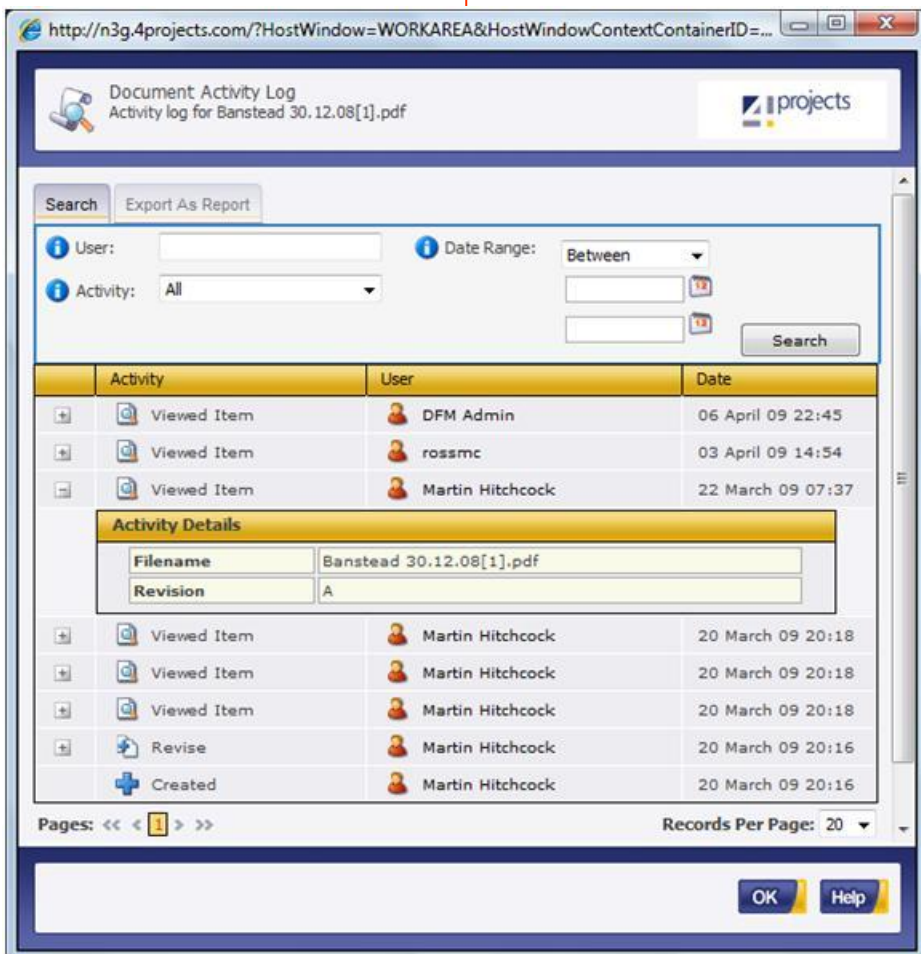


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For More Information

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For more information about Waitrose products and services, call (44) (0) 134 442 4680 or visit the Web site at:

www.waitrose.com

For more information about 4Projects visit www.4Retail.com.

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