Case Study: AERA

“Moving from an Intranet to portal technology requires a major shift in the way employees find and use information. Without the folks at Dell Professional Services, we would still be feeling our way along this path, but with their help we were able to jumpstart the process in a matter of months. We are still a long way from the knowledge-powered company we want to be, but we are definitely on the right track and with DPS's continued support we will continue to move in the right direction.”

-- Bernie Doyle, Vice President, CIO, AERA

Background

AERA is a diversified provider of information technology, engineering and logistics services for public and private sector clients. Headquartered in Alexandria, VA, AERA has approximately 500 employees and four business divisions, each run out of a different location, and each operating largely independently from the others. Approximately 50% of AERA staff work off-site.

Challenge

At the end of 2001, AERA was in the process of building an intranet site and engaged Plural, now part of Dell Professional Services (DPS), to implement SharePoint Portal Server (SPS). AERA's business objectives for implementing SPS were to:

- Enhance employee productivity by implementing a one-stop-shop for documents and tools, improving search and retrieval capabilities, and facilitating reuse of corporate assets.
- Improve AERA's ability to win new business by centralizing resumes, past proposals and past project descriptions.
- Enhance AERA's ability to attract, retain and develop talent by enhancing communication about company news, initiatives and other corporate information, such as benefits policies.

The initial engagement involved the design and development of the portal for a pilot audience, which was followed by a portal enhancement engagement that included completing the employee directory, rollout planning and training, and additional content migration assistance.

Solution

The initial solution focused on rapidly deploying out-of-the-box SPS functionality to get the system in use quickly. As a first step, experts with DPS researched and recommended strategies for integrating SharePoint into AERA's mixed technology environment. DPS experts also conducted interviews with key AERA stakeholders to identify existing documents and data for inclusion in the Portal and developed a taxonomy - a system for categorizing these documents to help facilitate document searching. DPS also provided recommendations for possible future site enhancements, as well as ways to manage the site to maintain its quality and usefulness.

Finally, to simplify the transition to the SharePoint portal, DPS developed scripts to automate the creation of pages on the SharePoint site. The scripts were used to build the document profiles, custom properties, property list values, document folders and categories; to import content and assign document meta-data; and to assign user permissions to document folders. Without the scripts, the time and effort involved to complete these tasks manually would have made adding information to the portal difficult and time consuming.
For the full corporate release, DPS experts developed an Employee Directory application that integrates with the portal and Active Directory, retrieves and updates employee contact information, and provides links to employee resume documents. DPS also provided training for site readers and authors for the official portal launch.

Results

Initial feedback to the pilot and corporate launch have been positive. Traffic on the portal rose steadily since its launch in May 2002, reaching about 50 visitors a day by June 2002. The rise in traffic is mirroring the steady increase in content being added to the site. As AERA employees are becoming more comfortable with the site, they are beginning to rely on it for conducting day-to-day tasks, such as filling out expense reports, travel claims, and personnel forms. AERA plans to add electronic timesheets which can be accessed only over the Portal by the end of 2002, which should increase the daily usage of the portal by employees even further.