



U.S. Department of Agriculture

Improves Time Capture and Client Billing



Industry: Government

Company Size: Large

Products Used: Client Bill

Challenges

- Centralized time and project billing system
- Simplified federally-mandated payroll system coding
- Reduced payroll processing from six to four days
- Quicker and more accurate employee time and project tracking
- Deeper analytics and reporting capabilities – including cost management improvements
- Increased opportunity to support new prospects and projects

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition and related issues based on public policy. Founded in 1862, USDA was signed into law by an act of Congress and President Abraham Lincoln, and today still fulfills Lincoln's vision in providing economic opportunity, promoting agriculture production, and preserving America's natural resources through initiatives in conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds and healthy private working lands. The USDA operates 27 bureaus that administer programs and services to meet its goals. Polaris works with the technical services department that delivers computing solutions to hundreds of employees and contractors across the country.

Legacy systems ripe for change

The USDA's Client Technology Services (CTS) provides computing services including implementation and maintenance of employee's smartphones, tablets, workstations and ancillary services to the desktop. The department enlists full-time employees and federal agency contractors to provide hundreds of projects to tens of thousands of users across the country.

According to John Gambriel, Program Manager, U.S. Department of Agriculture, the technical services staff used a mainframe-based system for capturing the hours they worked each week across various projects and agencies for payroll purposes. However, the system was unwieldy and ineffective for capturing detailed project or service activities, which resulted in ongoing complaints from both end users and senior management.

"We had a system that over many years became highly unusable. For the end user, the system lacked intuitive features to reliably enter hours each week. For example, project codes were listed as 27 digits, which was virtually impossible for people to recall. The system could also not keep running in the background, which led to higher chances of errors in hours entered," Gambriel said.

Another hindrance was the mainframe-based system's inability to capture data that was granular enough to be useful. While users could enter time into

the system, they lacked visibility into overall time spent on projects – which posed a problem as the agency scaled to track hundreds of individual projects and activities, and needed to manage hours with a deep level of granularity. Moreover, reporting was virtually nonexistent and the timeliness necessary for payroll purposes did not lend itself to accuracy.

“Because the system we used to track time and projects was linked to payroll, everyone needed to enter their time by Thursday or Friday at the end of the pay period. In some cases this meant that there was a lot of guesswork from users as the deadline was before they had finished up for the week. Meanwhile, our contractors had to send us their hours ahead of deadline, if they were captured at all, as they did not have access to the system. In short, our system lacked reporting functionalities to support resource utilization and efficiency decisions,” Gambriel said.

Recognizing that a simpler, more automated solution was needed, two senior management officials who had previously worked at the US Marine Corps and used Polaris recommended a similar solution to meet the USDA's business and technical issues.

Yielding the right time capture and client bill solution

The USDA evaluated six vendors, including Polaris. Polaris Client Bill was chosen against the USDA's rigorous selection requirements. Polaris Client Bill provides a centralized tracking and billing solution to align employees' time to specific projects, deliver advanced project planning and customized reports in minutes, and accelerate client billing and invoicing even as the business scales.

Polaris was rolled out gradually across the USDA's CTS organization, including to its federal contractors. While there was resistance to using Polaris Client Bill initially, once people used the application it was readily embraced throughout the organization.

“Change is always tough, particularly when the systems and processes being overhauled are well entrenched. However, even incremental changes can have a significant cultural shift by users – for example, changing the project codes to have simple titles rather than lengthy numeric codes. We also don't need to have time entered until Tuesday following a pay period, since the Polaris product is decoupled from payroll, which has undoubtedly improved data accuracy,” Gambriel said.

Another benefit of Polaris is its robust reporting engine, which provides deep insights into projects and service delivery across the organization, and also provides direct comparisons between branches to compare project performance and refine cost and hour estimates as needed.

“With Polaris, we have significantly minimized the administrative burden on our teams. Our accounting department, for example,



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has significantly simplified the coding, and subsequently the data collected, in our mandated payroll system, to rely heavily on Polaris to understand the percentage of time spent on jobs to fine-tune our service level agreements, performance measures and unit costs,” he said.

Sowing the seeds for agency-wide efficiencies

Moving forward, the USDA plans to maximize Polaris Client Bill to extract useful information on team hours and estimates, and drive further improvements across the organization. Recently, the USDA was privy to a Windows migration project for an office outside of its existing customer base – and using data from previous projects, was able to confidently bid for the project knowing that it could migrate several hundred machines easily in a day compared to the handful that the incumbent technical support had proposed and subsequently accurately track the project labor in close to real time.

“Polaris allows us to better plan our resources, and gives us a degree of data granularity that we never had before. We now have near real-time information and insights at our fingertips, and don’t need to wait for payroll to percolate to the general ledger. The ease-of-use of the solution, the comprehensive reporting capabilities and the responsiveness of the support team make working with Polaris a cinch,” Gambriel concluded.

Results

- Improved accuracy of project and client expenses
- Integrated expense entry with existing accounting systems
- Quicker time-to-reimbursement via mobile expense upload capabilities
- Automated time tracking to streamline payroll processing
- Compliance with existing wage and hour



About Polaris

Polaris, the world’s first Self-driving PSA, has created a new category for Professional Services Automation. For the first time, leaders get intelligent help with decision making as Polaris does the heavy lifting, analyzes real-time data, and delivers live recommendations on the best possible choices for them to decide from. Polaris is created by the team at Replicon, the Time Intelligence company, with over 25 years of industry leadership in enterprise time tracking. Replicon supports thousands of customers across 70 countries, including PwC, SAS, NTT, NSC Global, Omnicom, and Aon.

To learn more, visit www.polarispsa.com

Want to try it for your business?

Watch a live demo now. Free one-on-one support is available throughout the trial:

www.polarispsa.com/live-demo

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