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Lisa Kelly finds out how one food services company is restructuring its information management

Compass Group plots new course for information

GERHARD Eygelaar, director of IT for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at food services company Compass Group, is overseeing a fundamental change in the way information is shared, accessed and managed in his division.

Information management is no ready meal at the 400,000-employee organisation, which provides food, vending and related services in more than 90 countries.

Eygelaar is placing greater emphasis on sharing and managing information relating to IT for all employees within his region, which has responsibility for operations in 54 countries.

'We are in the process of making radical changes to the restructuring of IT, re-evaluating, redefining and rewriting the IT strategy,' says Eygelaar.

'For the first time there is an emphasis on corporate IT governance rather than just corporate governance.'

In most companies, IT is the domain of the finance director because of its huge impact on capital expenditure and relatively low visibility of return on investment, he says.

By opening up decision making, and giving technology an independent status, IT will no longer be merely an add-on for the finance department, while information management will become more democratic and transparent.

'IT will become an organisation within the organisation which will run independently,' says Eygelaar.

'It will still include the chief financial officer, but other business units such as sales, construction and the services unit will be represented on the IT governance

council, so every IT decision will have input from across the organisation.

'IT will automatically be more aligned with the business because decisions are made by the stakeholders, which will improve the way information is managed.'

Email management forms a crucial part of the company's information management strategy. It is the core method of conducting business, hosting 80 per cent of business activity.

Although the volume of email-related activity is unusually high, email management is gaining significance for most companies, says Ovum principal analyst Chris Harris-Jones.

'Email is an important aspect of corporate governance because so much business is done informally that way,' he says. 'Businesses need proper management and archiving, with trails

'With some employees receiving up to 200 emails a day, information can blow up extremely quickly'

reaching back at least seven years to meet compliance legislation.'

Considering Compass Group's reliance on email, and with many operations in remote sites, Eygelaar has chosen a hosted email service from Cobweb Solutions to solve issues such as access, storage and security.

'We have moved from a shared platform to a dedicated data centre,' he says.

'We have 2,500 users at present, but it will allow us to grow to up to 25,000.'

The hosted service permits remote access in sites with no PC availability, using multiple methods including BlackBerry devices and PDAs.

Eygelaar says the service includes a more comprehensive data retention policy.

'With some employees receiving up to 200 emails a day, information can blow up extremely quickly,' he says.

'Many are working in remote offices such as a drilling location, where they cannot back up data every night. We only have five hubs with a full IT infrastructure where their data is backed up every day.'

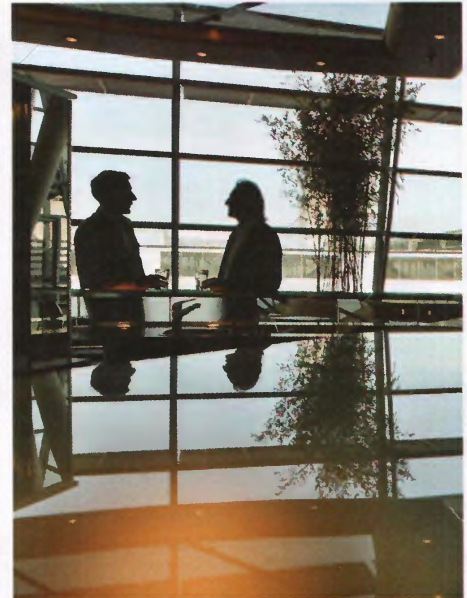
He says a policy on information storage is also essential to effective management of the information.

'We have had to develop a culture of archiving emails offline to free up inbox space,' he says.

And one of the group's most effective methods of exploiting information to drum up new business is through 4D² Camp Configurator, a business intelligence tool developed in-house.

The web-based program allows prospective clients to estimate the price of a camp using visual information.

Users must register their details, which are fed into a database used for precise targeting to generate sales.



Food services giant Compass Group is the world's second largest catering firm, with most of its business at airports and military sites

'The tool gives us an immediate advantage on potential business, otherwise it could take weeks trying to contact the right people,' says Eygelaar.

'It took more than two years to develop. We gave our biggest clients beta programs for feedback and it is still being refined.'

Refinement and development of information management is an ongoing process. Plans include using automation to update rules to the SAP database.

'Rules are updated frequently by database administrators,' says Eygelaar.

'Ensuring information quality is a hands-on job, but we are looking at automated tools.'

Another future project is to deploy Cobweb's Windows SharePoint Services.


The software, which is integrated with Microsoft Office applications and Exchange 2003, allows staff to work off the same page by creating team web sites for information sharing and document collaboration, instead of just dumping files into directories.

Web sites have document storage and retrieval, version history, custom metadata, search options and security controls governing information access.

'We want its content management properties and online collaboration for better access to information across geographic locations, which will help drive sales,' says Eygelaar.

'It solves the problem of silos of information being difficult to access because our people are distributed across 54 countries. Hopefully it will make our world a little bit smaller.'

Further reading
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IT governance strategy

IT DIRECTOR Gerhard Eygelaar's information management strategy for Compass Group in Europe, the Middle East and Africa stems from a belief that best practice is about pooling information from all the business units and making decisions based on consensus.

To this end, he is setting up an IT governance council.

'The first step to effective information management is getting IT governance in place,' he says. 'IT is a service to the rest of the business. If you don't know what the service has to do, you won't ever get it right.'

'If an IT director makes a strategic decision and finds it is not working because of lack of participation from the business units, the strategy will break down because people don't understand the value of the decision.'

Ovum principal analyst Chris Harris-Jones says Eygelaar is right to focus on the relationship between corporate governance and

information management. 'The link is important and gives huge credence in the US with legislation such as Sarbanes-Oxley, but we will catch up,' he says.

However, Eygelaar recognises that you cannot deliver 100 per cent satisfaction.

'If we decide to go in a certain direction it is not possible to suit everyone all the time, but it is important to know how the business units relate to each other,' he says.

'If there is a problem with a decision for one unit, it needs to be flagged up so it can be mitigated.'

He also advises companies to guard against reaching a comfort zone.

'We are a dynamic company and we need to stay dynamic,' he says. 'The business changes every single day and an information management policy must respond to this.'