

Morris Publishing Group, the publishing arm and core business unit of Augusta, Ga.-based Morris Communications Co., owns and operates 27 editorially independent but financially integrated daily newspapers and other publications in the Southeast, Midwest, Southwest and Alaska. When Morris decided several years ago to seek tighter change control capabilities for its newly implemented SAP® solution-based business information system, it turned to Revelation Software Concepts Pty Ltd. The 25-member Morris team supporting the company's SAP implementation now considers RSC's Rev-Trac® change-control management solution a key addition to its IT capabilities.

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Paul Buckley, Chief Technology Officer,
Morris Communications

Integrating the Corporate Side of Independent News Operations



Morris Communications formed Morris Publishing Group in 2001 to support and centrally coordinate corporate operations of its editorially independent newspapers across the U.S.

Shortly after it formed, the group began a phased rollout of an enterprise-wide SAP-based business intelligence infrastructure. Its objective was a tricky one - to integrate, at the corporate level, all financial and much of the operational intelligence coming in from the company's many publishing businesses, including the newspapers.

In the process, Morris planned to roll out a new MySAP media module for U.S. markets, the North American Media module. The SAP rollout was to take place in a phased progression with the minimum possible disruption of established practices at the individual publications, many of which had evolved their own systems over a period of years. It was a complex and demanding conversion.

Customer story

Dimensions of the Challenge

Morris Publishing Group needed to maintain the editorial independence of its operating units but leverage the advantages of a large, unified organization when negotiating with suppliers and other outside organizations. Morris also needed to comply with Sarbanes-Oxley reporting requirements, a task that would be greatly simplified by integrating corporate functions across all entities. The process integration would affect all units, so close coordination of changes was absolutely required.

Morris Technology Services, the technology unit for Morris Communications, implemented the SAP rollout, a phased process now complete for publishing business units, though it continues for various nonpublishing units, which still migrate to the SAP platform on a quarterly basis. For its publishing units, Morris needed to integrate financial data continually arriving from many different locations, not always in identical formats. Leveraging the great flexibility of the new SAP-based solution, the 25-member IT team was able to meet those specific needs. However, the fact of centralizing these operations meant changes in one area now affected every part of the Publishing Group system. Errors in implementing changes had to be kept to an absolute minimum.

Close coordination with Morris' multiple quasi-independent entities was a challenge. Even simple changes made to satisfy business or legal requirements could involve many modifications, some involving configuration, others changes to programs, tables, field labels, screens, help texts and more. An extensive business requirement might involve several developers, each saving changes to multiple transports. For the business logic to work as expected, every transport had to be migrated in the right sequence. The effects of any errors would be magnified as they rippled out to every unit.

Such processes are especially vulnerable to human error because of the multiple, complex testing and scheduling requirements, notes Matthew Clemente, the SAP Basis

Lead for Morris Technology Services. A single unresolved "orphan" transport can disrupt the whole system if accidentally imported incorrectly. Multiple transports needed for a single change in business logic may get out of sequence. Transport migrations may be left unfinished. Undetected minor errors can have sudden, cumulative effects that may be quite difficult to diagnose and resolve.

During this rollout, the IT team found itself restoring backups often enough to impact the overall project. Verifying each transport manually was becoming costly and time-consuming.

Surveying the Field

The transition team needed a solution and realized they required enhanced change management, not just transport management of the sort already built into SAP-based solutions. The team went looking for the answer.

"When we found problems internally involving missing transports, the cost per incident turned out to be fairly significant. If we could eliminate just two incidents annually, we could justify the cost of Rev-Trac in the first year."

Initial reviews included change management products for various application development projects, even several used outside of SAP solution environments. The hope was to find one tool suitable for all in-house projects but the search failed because the operating environments varied while SAP products use an internal language specific to SAP solutions.

The search focused next on change management products specifically for SAP-based environments. Only Rev-Trac had the features needed for the extensive and highly dispersed Morris infrastructure. Further, most of what Morris needed came as a standard part of the basic Rev-Trac package. Those things specific to the extensive Morris environment could be configured during implementation, without delaying the process.

The Rev-Trac Solution

In selecting the RSC change management solution, the search team noted that Rev-Trac flags sequencing errors all along the chain, from development through to production. The software forces developers to associate every new transport with a Rev-Trac "request," a record that represents a single business requirement. Rev-Trac holds the request and its associated transports together in one conceptual "container" with all associated documentation and approvals.

Rev-Trac's reporting, viewing and logging functions also fit very well with Sarbanes-Oxley and other regulatory reporting requirements, making legal compliance much easier. Required reports that are not part of the standard change management package are straightforward to derive from the standard information Rev-Trac provides directly.

The Installation

The initial installation went without incident. The team leader credited RSC's preparation checklist with eliminating most of the snags before the installation itself began, so the initial process went very smoothly. The first Monday was spent finishing the installation and linking up system components. The team had the transport movement history loaded by mid-afternoon Tuesday and the training process began before the middle of the day on Wednesday.

Since that first experience, Morris has kept up with upgrades and improvements from RSC, and now uses Rev-Trac in three SAP landscapes - R/3, BI and EBP. Together, these landscapes comprise ten systems.

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Morris served also as a pilot for native SAP North American Media Module. Reports Clemente, "As with any complex business application, the North American Media module implementation had its challenges. Using Rev-Trac to manage the changes, however, Morris is live today with the full Media module in two newspapers with other sites planned following an upgrade to the latest version of the SAP software."

Today, as Morris expands its focus in the areas of magazines and outdoor advertising, the team has come to rely on Rev-Trac to manage its SAP-based infrastructure changes as the company evolves.

The Rev-Trac Difference

When the Morris Publishing Group found internal problems, especially with missing transports, the company tracked its costs. The cost per incident turned out to be significant.

"We calculated the time we spent restoring the environment and reloading transports, and extrapolated the cost if it were actually in a production environment," reported Bruce Paulus, Software Quality Assurance Manager during the initial installation period. "If we could eliminate only two incidents a year, we could justify the cost of Rev-Trac in the first year, combined with the savings on Basis."

Today, all Morris Publishing Group business units are live on the SAP solution, reports Matthew Clemente, the Senior Basis Lead. "Our SAP implementation is an ongoing project for the company, with new business units migrating to the SAP platform on a quarterly basis. We rely on Rev-Trac to keep these transitions trouble-free and smooth."

Clemente says Rev-Trac has significantly reduced the amount of manual labor involved in transport management across the SAP infrastructure. "Its workflow and notification functionality has become an essential component of intra-team communications at Morris, too," he notes. "Rev-Trac's built-in reports and tools have proven invaluable in keeping the landscape consistent. We regularly use the Rev-Trac reports during major change events, such as client or system copies. And Rev-Trac's built-in reports and tools have proven invaluable in keeping the landscape consistent."

Rev-Trac has also helped prepare Morris for its internal audits by providing documented

workflow configuration, detailed audit trail reporting, and tight integration with SAP's strict change control mechanisms. And it has assisted in preventing segregation of duties issues, says Clemente.

"Rev-Trac's automated migration workflow has even enabled the Morris SAP development team to work in a 24x7 fashion when required," says Clemente. "We have not had to hire additional staff to manage the SAP transport system. And Rev-Trac's sophisticated Overtake and Overwrite Protection System (OOPS) has prevented numerous errors from making their way into the production environment."

Moving Forward

Using the existing Outlook-based notification system at Morris, Rev-Trac now provides complete control, linking documents as well as all specs to change requests. This eliminates previous storage challenges because of specs being stored in various areas, so Rev-Trac also eliminated any need to buy a separate document management tool.

In planning for other sites to migrate following an upgrade to the latest version of the SAP software, the Morris team is looking forward to leveraging the Rev-Trac solution to keep the process as trouble-free as possible. Morris Communications Chief Technology Officer Paul Buckley calls Rev-Trac "an essential component of the Morris SAP upgrade project."

As the phased rollout continues, Morris expects to see the savings and enhanced operation expand as its SAP solution-based business information system propagates throughout the extensive Morris Communications corporate structure.

"Morris' experience with Rev-Trac support has been entirely positive," says Buckley. "The team at RSC has gone above and beyond to ensure that the Morris team's questions and issues were addressed promptly and satisfactorily. The Rev-Trac support team has raised the bar for customer service."

"The Morris Communications SAP team have become Rev-Trac converts," adds Buckley. "I would recommend RSC and Rev-Trac to others without hesitation."

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"Morris continues to have a rewarding experience with the Rev-Trac software and with RSC in general. The software has been a valuable tool for the SAP teams in increasing efficiency while reducing risk. And the support of the RSC team has been second-to-none."

Paul Buckley, Chief Technology Officer,
Morris Communications

