



On the Road to the ICASL IT Road-Map



Harin Fernando speaks to Gayan Wickramasinghe, the Chief Information Officer of ICASL on the institute's futuristic IT Road-Map and its progress so far.

sharing capability among various divisions in the institute. Thanks to the availability of 'Virtual Private Networks' or VPNs in short, we can extend the services of these solutions to remote ICASL branches and divisions which are in different premises. We have already implemented a VPN with the IT Training Division.

The development and implementation of SMMS is done by a local software house, whom we have selected via a tender. The total cost of this project is approximately Rs 8 million. The Finance and Inventory Management System, which went live towards the end of 2006, is a well known off-the-shelf Enterprise Resource Planning solution known as Pronto. In contrast, SMMS is being custom developed to suit the complex and unique set of activities carried out by various functional divisions of ICASL.

We are doing the implementation of SMMS on a module by module basis. We have already launched the Registration Module that handles all student registration activities and in the pipeline is the Exams Module that is planned to be ready for this November's exams. It was earlier planned to go live in July, but now we are looking at going live for the November exams after incorporating some changes to the module. This module automates almost all the functions relating to the exams division, from student admission card printing to result sheets generation and all other pre and post examination functions.

Following this we plan to go live with the modules such as member relations, practical training and studies. The Receipt Module which I mentioned at the beginning is a common module which handles student and member payments, and this is already live. This module also carries out the functions of

uploading and synchronising the student payment details received through the Bank of Ceylon Branches all over the island, with the ICASL database. As the name suggests, the Member Relations Module is designed to carry out activities related to the ICASL members, such as maintaining member profiles, member renewals and keeping records of Continuous Professional Development of members. The Practical Training Module automates all aspects pertaining to practical training offered by various organisations to the ICASL students, which is essential to qualify as a chartered accountant. The Studies Module helps to manage all the chartered and non-chartered courses conducted by ICASL.

On the other components of the IT Road-Map?

In June this year we launched an e-payments facility in the ICASL website, 'www.icasrilanka.com.' This enables members to renew their membership or pay for seminars and workshops via the website, using credit cards in a very few steps. As the website is accessible from all over the world, this gives a greater freedom to members to renew their membership from anywhere in the world. We are in the process of extending this facility to students and third parties as well.

a pilot project. As the first step, we are in the process of launching CDs along with the ICASL Exams Study Packs. This is a project done with the collaboration of the Studies Division and the Library, and most probably we will be able to release the first pilot project CD, for the subject 'Commercial Law' for the Final I Exams, by early November. These CDs are aimed at complementing the studying process of students by presenting the study material in a very interactive multimedia format, with narrated text, real life video clips, animations, illustrations, pictures, diagrams, quizzes, and exercises. We hope to issue these CDs along with the study packs.

The long term plan is to enable access to these multimedia learning guides via the ICASL website. The lack of propagation of internet and low bandwidths in Sri Lanka has been a limiting factor for presenting full featured multimedia content over the web. Enabling online exams is of course a very futuristic and an ambitious goal, but is not out of reach for us.

On the potential benefits?

At present most divisions of ICASL have their own software applications to automate the work routines to a small extent. The biggest problem in this approach is that there is no information sharing

it's very important to convince the users of the benefits of the new work routines which are introduced with the new system.

This is the first step we have taken in re-vamping the ICASL website. We are hoping to integrate the website with our information system, SMMS, and give it a complete facelift before the end of the year.

Another very important component of the IT Road-Map is to build an intranet information system. At present various kinds of information is strewn all over the Institute in various forms, some in soft-form stored in various PCs, and some in hard-form stored as stacks of files. We hope to develop a system which integrates and enables sharing of these pieces of information, giving the ICASL staff a quick and efficient mode of access to the relevant information. ICASL activity calendar, staff profiles, staff attendance, leave information, meeting room bookings and lecture hall bookings are all parts of this project, which is yet to take off.

Is there an online learning aspect?

Yes, this is a very important component of the IT Road-Map and is in the process of being designed as

or validation of integrity of the information that is maintained in isolation. Since databases belonging to various divisions are not shared or integrated, for activities that involve the participation of multiple divisions, a lot of paper work comes into play, for instance in the form of memos which are passed between divisions.

So with the help of the IT Road-Map we aim to automate most of the functions carried out by various divisions. By moving into the digital age, we hope to improve the speed, efficiency and effectiveness of work processes carried out here at the Institute. Even though there are mixed feelings about the changes in the work processes by the users of the new System, I hope that with time to come, after getting used to the new work routines, the users will realise the full benefits of these projects.

From one side, ICASL will move from a largely paper based, old fashioned environment, to an office of the digital age, improving the quality of work-life of its staff. On the other side with this automation,

the speed and the quality of services offered by ICASL to its members and students is bound to make a quantum leap. This will definitely help to attract more people to select ICASL for their accountancy qualifications.

In addition to the obvious improvements, do you see job losses or will individuals be re-assigned?

Reduction of staff has never been on the agenda of this IT Road-Map. With this automation process we can train and re-assign certain staff members to handle much better job functions and let the routine and mechanical functions be carried out by the system, improving the quality of the jobs.

To make this process a success, Staff Training on the new system is vital. We have arranged system walk-throughs, demonstrations and presentations to accomplish this. During the development and implementation stages, these demonstration sessions have also helped in giving the system developers the vital feedback of the user opinion of the system and the necessary changes.

How many members are there in the IT team? Or do you have specific members joining for the implementation of this?

We have four permanent staff members including myself at the ICT Division, Roshan is the systems analyst and Dhanushka is the hardware technician. In addition to our staff, there are two teams from the vendor who are stationed here; one team directly from the vendor to supervise the project and the other team who is sub-contracted by the vendor to carry out the software development.

The CEO and the Finance Director are key members of the IT Steering Committee. Their support is vital in re-engineering the institute's work processes to be in-line with the IT System and mitigating various obstacles which need management intervention. The project progress is evaluated routinely at the IT Working Committee meetings as well as IT Steering Committee meetings. The IT Steering Committee comprising of ICASL members and ICASL staff are keenly contributing to the progress of the IT Road-Map.

Technology is something that has always been changing. How are you looking into adapting and securing the IT Road-Map for the future?

We are using one of the most popular IT development platforms, called 'MS-Dot-Net' running on MS-Windows. Of course even these platforms change very rapidly, so keeping up with the pace of changes

in the technology will always be a challenge.

Not only the technology, but also the user requirements or even the institute as a whole is bound to change with time. Thus we have entered into a service level agreement with the vendor where future changes and updates will be incorporated to the system. This will enable us to keep pace with the dynamic technological environment as well as to cater for the evolving needs of the institute.

What are the biggest obstacles you face?

As with many IT Projects in Sri Lanka, we have had our share of issues in the SMMS project. The issues are two pronged; on one side there are issues with the vendor, and on the other side there are issues with the System users.

Over the past few months on this project, we have observed a lot of discrepancies in the manner in which the project is being done. One of the main stages in the Software Development Life Cycle is Testing and Quality Assurance, but this was sadly lacking in this project. There have been several discussions over this issue and we have seen a fair improvement. Another area which we have requested the vendor to improve is the "response-times" and "turn-around times" for fixing issues in the modules which are already live, as we can't let the users idle until the system is fixed.

Although the planning and analysis stages of SMMS have been extensive with the testament of the stacks of documents we have collated, there were many functionality gaps between the design and the user requirements. This has caused delays to the implementation of certain modules.

Migration of data from the legacy systems to the new system is another daunting task that the ICT Division is carrying out. To give you an idea of how complex this process is, the number of records of exam results from 1999 up to now is in the range of 700,000. To make matters more complex there are syllabus changes from time to time and the availability of certain information is only in hard copies. To help us with transferring paper based information to the new system, we have hired a three member team from an audit firm recently and this has relieved the work load in the data migration process to some extent.

Humans are generally resistive to change, whether it's for good or for bad. This general tendency plays a big role in project failures all over the world. So it's very important to convince the users of the benefits of the new work routines which are introduced with the new system. Our experience with Pronto

is that, sceptics during the initial stages can become believers after they see how convenient, efficient and fast the new work routines are.

You will be collecting a lot of personal data, how will you ensure the Security and Integrity of this?

The System has several types of user profiles with different levels of access to view, edit and delete information. Some profiles only allow users to view details whereas some allow users to edit as well. Apart from this, there is an audit trace facility implemented in the system to track all the changes made by the system users, by logging the user name and the time.

Do you have any intention of using the database for commercial purposes?

Not at present. We will continue to use it for internal correspondences, but we have no plans to use it on a commercial basis at present.

How has IT overrun the profession of accountancy?

At present IT has taken over a lot of functions in accountancy. A good example is the software we have implemented to handle the finance and accounting functions. It can handle most of the functions carried out by an accountant, from double entry to annual reports. But when it comes to high level decision-making, there's nothing to replace the human accountant... well, at-least not as yet!



Vasani Manodara Director Finance and a key member of the IT steering committee sees the Roadmap as a major move towards integration. "Previously we had a few stand alone systems in isolation now we have integrated two key divisions registrations and examinations coming on board. Implementation of the new accounting package and ERP based system has given us a complete system, this has also improved the timeliness of the preparation of the periodic financial reports. Payment gateway now provides an easy mechanism for members to settle their dues to ICASL from any part of the world.

ICASL IT Road Map

The IT Road Map has several sub components as illustrated below :

