



Accountable Technology



APS Case Studies

Removing a main obstacle to accountancy growth: APS overcomes the 'scalability' threat

For many - perhaps most - successful accountancy practices, there's a hidden obstacle to growth. It's usually revealed only when the business is building momentum. The practice finds its computer system can't cope with the extra workload. The reason: the system doesn't have "scalability".

Success brings breakdown

"Scalability" isn't just an IT buzzword. A scalability problem isn't just another glitch. It's not just a matter of slow loading and the occasional frozen screen. It isn't "something we can get the IT people to work around". Many firms thought that - until it caused difficulties throughout their practices and brought parts of them to a halt.

This supposed buzzword is in reality a bringer of breakdown, a destroyer of profitability.

It gridlocks the practice, dissatisfies existing clients and degrades the very reputation for good service which attracted the new business in the first place.

And there's another way it cuts directly into profitability. The areas of acutest difficulty will be high-volume transactions such as timesheet entries and then billing. A scalability failure is now recognised as the commonest obstacle to accountancy growth. Solving it can be much harder than attracting the new business that caused it. And that's as true for a big firm with an international perspective as for a regional practice.

So every practice needs to anticipate the problem. That includes those whose systems are fairly new. As many have discovered, the software might have a big name but small scalability.

Mazars was quick to recognise the problem and the need for a fresh approach

Looking for a better way

Mazars is the UK member of the Mazars international accountancy and consultancy group. The group is the biggest practice in Europe outside the Big Four. The UK firm has 18 offices and a staff of 1,000, including 90 partners. It's the country's 12th largest accountancy partnership in terms of fee income.

So, as one would expect, it has long invested heavily in the latest technology. For example, it prides itself on being the first UK accountancy firm to adopt a policy of a laptop for each of its professional staff when, as it says, "other accountants were still using quill pens".

Even so, its practice management system needed to scale to the practice's expanding requirements. This led Mazars into discussions with APS.

Dealing with fellow professionals

Like Mazars itself, APS has an international perspective. In the early 1990s, it established itself in New Zealand and then Australia. In these markets, its Advance® systems are now used by some 12,000 users worldwide and are rapidly becoming the supplier of first choice. APS launched itself in the UK in 1999 and is growing fast, here too.

APS brought to Mazars a unique understanding of what accountants need from their systems. That's because it specialises in those systems; which are designed for accountants, not adapted for them.

And APS has experience of working closely with the profession around the world. As a result, its team members are genuine experts in their field (as well as understanding all aspects of the technology). None of APS's competitors can match this profound expertise.

So, when Mazars began talking with APS, they were dealing with fellow professionals.

A total solution

The initial project covered Mazars' London Region, with some 500 system users.

The first requirement was user-friendly front-of-office access to time recording and billing. Advance® Enterprise Edition meets this by offering two styles of entering timesheets - the standard format and a diary style which can be linked to Microsoft Outlook's tasks facility.

Mazars also wanted remote processing of timesheets. This, too, is an Advance® feature, ensuring that staff on the move keep their records up to date and that fee income isn't lost.

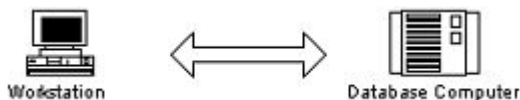
And, on the crucial test of scalability, Advance® succeeded where Mazars' previous system had failed. For example, the firm's current installation of Advance® enables timesheets to be updated by 500 users at any one time - and that can be scaled up to more than 1,000.

For Mazars, as for many others, APS had delivered a total solution.

How it works, why it matters

For those practices needing it, Advance® can easily expand to serve many thousands of concurrent users. This is achieved by its use of the most modern multi-tier architecture.

To explain how this works, here first is the traditional "client-server" set-up:



Any practice using this will be squandering system resources. Each workstation has its own connection to the central database. But, at any moment, most connections are idle.

With Advance®, there's an intervening computer to handle connections between workstations and the database:



The middle-tier computer connects a workstation to the database only when the user wants to perform an action.

Suppose the practice has 1,000 users, but no more than 100 of these are interacting with the database at any moment. The traditional system would require 1,000 connections, of which some 900 would be always idle. But Advance®, by allocating connections inside the middle-tier computer only when they're needed, can cope with the same number of users with only some 100 connections.

Advance® achieves even greater efficiency by the way it handles the most numerous transactions, such as:

- timesheet entries (which in most practices make up about 60 per cent of work-in-progress transactions);
- fees (about 10 per cent).



The system is specifically designed to minimise the load they put on the system. So the multi-tier architecture enables many more users to use the same size database - or a smaller, cheaper one.

That makes the system extremely economical in terms of cost-per-user. And there's abundant scope for further expansion because of the efficient use of the hardware, which is the part of the system which usually limits scalability.

Clearer vision, better strategy

At the same time, Advance® met another major requirement stipulated by Mazars: an overview of the practice. The firm needed easily accessible information to monitor its progress and provide the essential basis for strategic planning. In particular, the partners wanted more meaningful and more frequent business performance reports on their desktops.

Now the information is available instantly. From the centralised database, Advance® effortlessly extracts the data generating powerful performance management reports and displays it via a web browser. "It enables the executive of a practice to monitor and manage the business like never before," says Brian Coventry, APS's UK Managing Director. "Daily access to performance data lets you know where you are and where you're going - and you get warning of any problems on the immediate horizon. National practices like Mazars are turning to this method of business management. I'm pleased to say that APS are clear leaders in the use of the technology that drives this requirement."

The system was installed at Mazars in May 2001.

Steven Ollech, IT Partner at Mazars, had overall responsibility for its implementation. He explained, "we had a very aggressive timetable and achieved it; this is due to the excellent team work and collaborative spirit created by personnel in APS and with our own staff. The system has met all of our objectives."

Mazars installed:

Advance® 2000 Enterprise Edition
Advance® Practice IQ Online Reporting.

Technology employed:

Microsoft Advanced Server 2000
Microsoft SQL Server 2000
Microsoft Analysis Server
Microsoft COM + Services
Citrix Metaframe 1.8 now upgraded to XP
Microsoft Digital Dashboard & IIS5

Tasks addressed:

online timesheets for 1000 concurrent users
online and automated billing
online business performance reporting
flexible organisation structure design
multiple entities
centralised system for national practice.
Mazars: <http://www.mazars-nr.co.uk>
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