1995

Federal Awards

HONOURING THE WINNERS

*The 3rd annual celebration
of excellence in the management of information
and technology in the federal government.*

Strategic Direction Awards

GOLD MEDAL WINNERS

Category A: Renewing Services and Program Delivery Information

Technology Branch, Revenue Canada

EDI Revolutionizes Customs Work

Until the late eighties, every time a loaded transport truck crossed the U.S. border into Canada it consumed a small tree-worth of forms and paper. Clamped on the driver's clipboard was all the cargo documentation that described in triplicate the nature and contents of his load. The process demanded yet more paper, full of "Release Data" specifying who can pick up the load from its destination bonded warehouse. Then more paper rolled out to account for import duties and taxes.

Aside from the ravages the process waged on our forests, clearing customs with paper tied up an expensive resource (the driver) and his high cost asset (the truck) at the border for up to three, non-revenue earning hours or more.

But since 1988, Revenue Canada's Customs Border Services Branch has brought the accelerating effect of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) to bear on this paper proliferation. Its first EDI application, the Customs Automated Data Exchange (CADEX) system, now enables 350 customs brokers and other private sector companies to do their accounting with the Branch electronically. Thanks to CADEX, fully 85 percent of all the Branch's commercial transactions on duty and taxes owing are processed without a pen ever touching paper.

Since 1990, under Revenue Canada's concerted attempt to redefine its business relationship with clients, Customs has continued to press EDI into service. The Branch's ACROSS pilot project — for Accelerated Commercial Release Operations Support System — in conjunction with CADEX means importers at selected loca-

Last September, nominees for federal IT awards were wined and dined at the Museum of Civilization, in Hull, Quebec. Medals were awarded to 19 civil servants in recognition of their innovative efforts to improve service and cut costs in government.

tions no longer need to present any paper to government to clear their shipments. Branch officials believe it is the first in the world to achieve paperless commercial customs processing. And it is all at significant savings

tend to ship towards the end of the week, most freight arrives in customs on the weekends. That means Sunday we are in full operation and with the ACROSS system working in advance for us we can have Customs start

Canada are taking advantage of Customs' unique local area network. Over 25 predominantly 486-based PCs run what's called the Customs Data Interchange system. It translates over 2 million inbound and outbound messages annually while running a myriad of special applications for both staff and clients. As well, the system links to other networks including a priority connection to the government's X.400 messaging system.

Branch and Gilbert Doucet, chief for CADEX and EDI along with John Cope, project manager for EDI/ACROSS, both from the Customs Services Branch.

Concludes customs broker Schwerdt about their work: "They have completely changed and improved the way we do business. And it is not an overstatement to say that it is the single most exciting thing to come along in our industry this century."

> **"If the private sector showed as much enthusiasm for EDI as the federal government has, the whole country would be much better off."**

for government and client alike. CP Rail alone estimates that an EDI-based customs services saves the transport giant $4 million a year.

"The whole process is exemplary," says Peter Schwerdt of LEP International Inc. in Toronto, a mid-sized customs broker and a keen ACROSS participant. "If the private sector showed as much enthusiasm for EDI as the federal government has, the whole country would be much better off."

Schwerdt says ACROSS has given his firm a significant 24-hour competitive edge. "Because shippers

releasing goods to us at 6:00 am Monday. That means the goods can be on their way to the purchaser by the end of the day at the latest," explains Schwerdt. "For other firms that are still paper-based, it's not likely they can start shipping until Tuesday or Wednesday."

Among other cost-savings and benefits, EDI-served Customs clients can: eliminate copying, fax and courier costs, streamline their customs reporting operations, reduce document handling errors and receive 15-minute notice of all Customs decisions and rulings.

Some clients are receiving even more EDI-based benefits. More than 150 of the major marine and rail cargo carriers in

The Customs Data Interchange system has opened up Customs' service hours to a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, 365-day-a-year "lights out" operation. And while most of the country sleeps, the system monitors itself, ringing up service technicians on the phone if there is a problem. At the same time, Customs officers have 12.5 million fewer documents to file and need only half the time it took to issue a customs release. In all, EDI-based Customs services over the next four years will save Revenue Canada a total of almost 300 person years.

Credit for the award goes to the collaborative efforts of three teams — one from Revenue Canada headquarters and two from the Customs Branch itself. Cited for their work as team leaders were Michael Ritch, the project manager for EDI applications at the department's Information Technology

NAIS Web Site: Best Federal Investment Yet?

Project director Jean Thie accepted the gold medal in the Investing Strategically category for what the respected Ottawa Citizen high technology writer Alana Kainz has described as, "... maybe the most useful and interactive government service to date."

The National Atlas Information Service (NAIS) World Wide Web site (http://www.nais.ccm.emr.ca) provides users with access to major national databases and hands over unique map-making and analytical tools.

At the site, you can search through 500,000 geographical names and draw off maps for virtually any of them. And literally the sky is the limit. You can draw off national or regional maps. You can map wetlands, earthquakes, endangered species or even the pollution affecting your own backyard. Or you can visit native communities, "drive" cross-country, or "walk" through a city.

And it all came about with an investment of money, people, time — and a gamble.

"We took a risk as an organization," says Thie, the now retired project director. "I put 25 people on the project for three months, full time, to implement the technology. We wanted it to be the best in the world."

Accolades from around the world have poured in since site went operational in 1994. Twice the U.S. WWW crawler, Netscape, has named the NAIS site, "Cool Site of the Day" — a rare honour to be named even once. "The richest national data base!" enthused a professor from Strasbourg (France) by e-mail. "You are setting an example for the world to follow," wrote a professor from Berkeley, California.

The upshot is that thousands of users now descend on the site every day. And so far, users have drawn off more than 100,000 maps. The biggest users include all Canadian universities as well as major corporations such as IBM and Bell Northern Research. Maps you see backdropping a story on television's national news may well have been downloaded by the CBC.

All this, of course, has been free to users who are likely unaware how good the NAIS web site really is as an investment. Sales of paper-based maps and digital data produced by NAIS and Environment Canada, a project partner, have skyrocketed thanks partly to the electronic ordering service built into the site.

Award winners posed with their medals at the September gala, along with Bob Little (centre), head of the Financial Information Management Branch of the Treasury Board Secretariat.
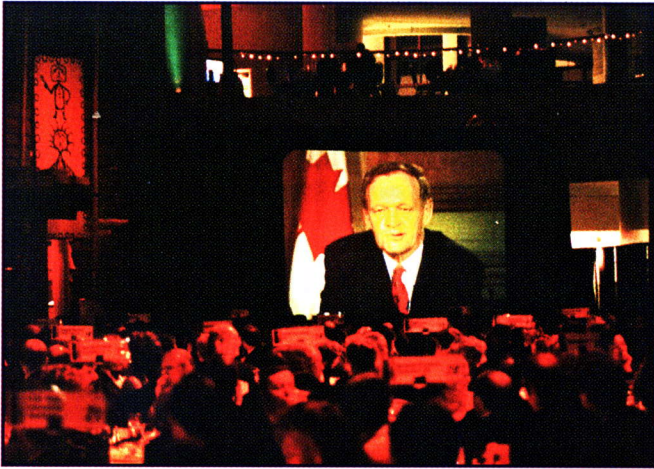
Prime Minister Jean Chretien thanked the attendees for their creativity and ability to use information technology to improve the processes of government.

This phenomenon is not going unnoticed by the federal government's IT powers that be. "It is a highly innovative service and its usage is widespread," says Tony Chu at the Office of Information Management Systems and Technology at Treasury Board. Chu is overseer of the federal government's IT strategy (Blueprint) implementation. "It is a very good illustration of what we were suggesting in the Blueprint because it also streamlines a service and builds a whole new infrastructure."

Chu adds he is reminded of the site's value almost nightly. "My own kids use it for their homework."

And thousands more students will be doing the same soon. Shortly after the Awards night in Hull, NAIS launched the National Atlas on SchoolNet from an elementary school in Edmonton.

Aside from betting they could do it, Thie credits his project's gold medal to a team-wide vision of the service constantly extending its reach. "We started looking at the World Wide Web as a strategic tool to reach a mass audience. In the beginning, we had a pretty obscure audience for most of our map making work, but our web site has changed that completely."

Even in retirement, Thie is still reaching for larger audiences. As executive director of the non-profit International Centre for Spatial Information and Management Access, he is marketing the NAIS site's innovative technology internationally.

"We developed a piece of technology we call geographic information system (GIS) technology and we were able to apply it to the Web," explains Thie. "We were able to apply it because of one piece of innovative software created by one of our team members."

That software has made the NAIS site the first in the world to employ GIS and has dramatically improved the interactive capabilities of the Internet.

That alone should inspire others to emulate what Thie and his team have done. So here's how Thie organized his people. First of all, Thie and project managers Tom Alfredi and Peter Paul actually labeled themselves not project managers but coaches and took a consultative approach with a dozen specialty teams.

First was the geographic names team of Paul O'Blenes, Helen Kerfoot, Jocelyne Revie and Kathleen O'Brien.

Then came Diane Mann, Paul Harker, Ronald Savard and Mike Zaborski working as a data selection team. Karl Siemonsen and Terry Williams formed the data presentation team while Paul Harker and Diane Chapman did data supplement and text description work.

Digitizing all this were of Erin O'Shaugnessy, Ivy Rose, Mike Zaborski and Robin Sagriff on the file conversion team.

James Lee and Glen New-

ton were the hardware support team while Chapman, Eric Dewhirst, Diane Lacasse, Ken Lightfoot and André Caron developed the user-interface.

Dan Mackay, Charles Maclean and Margaret Trindad made up the marketing team. Karen Collingwood, Revie, Heather Ross and O'Brien were the project's review team.

Diane Blondin, Alain Gagné and Ginette Patenaude gave translation support. Alison Bouchier, Dorothy Love and Carole Ruel handled communications.

Environment Canada's participation consisted of Jean Séguin, Art Goldsmith and Francois Lavallée.

So there's how the winning team played and who played

"We developed a piece of technology we call geographic information system (GIS) technology and we were able to apply it to the Web..."

on it. And if you'd like to repeat what they have done perhaps you should take the advice of the late and great football coach at Queen's University, Frank Tindall. When asked by reporters if it bothered him to use plays for his team that other teams had invented, Tindall would reply with a blue-eyed glint: "I believe, if it works — steal it."