Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) had traditionally relied on a secure telex system to link its Ottawa headquarters and its 146 embassies, consulates and missions around the world.

Recognizing these realities, in 1991 Garrett Lambert, DFAIT's assistant deputy minister for corporate management, challenged his staff. He asked them to go beyond replacing the aging telex system to build a complete information technology infrastructure capable of taking DFAIT into the 21st century.

2. Process

Strategic Plan Sets the Course

Lambert appointed Ron Hartling to be the project manager for the agency's global network and directed him to write a strategic plan for the new information technology infrastructure. The plan outlined three major components.

The first component was messaging. DFAIT needed to replace the old, 50 baud telex system with a much higher-bandwidth information transfer mechanism, to accommodate the rapid and cost-effective movement of documents with formatted text and graphics — not just uppercase ASCII text — around the world. Previously the only option for sending full documents securely was via diplomatic bags carried by couriers, which was both too expensive and too slow for DFAIT's needs.

The strategic plan next called for a consistent set of office automation tools for people to use everywhere within DFAIT. As with the military, the foreign ministry is a rotational service in which staff members move as they are reassigned. To keep training costs under control, the department wanted to standardize on a consistent set of systems, software and tools throughout its operations.

"We face the same budget pressures as all public sector organizations these days, but magnified three or four times by the cost of keeping and training people abroad," explains Hartling. DFAIT employs 2,300 people in Canada and another 5,700 scattered around the globe. As a result, uniform office automation tools were a primary concern.

Finally, DFAIT determined that it needed corporate applications that would let it manage its dispersed operations more effectively with reduced resources. Unable to afford the support staff everywhere to do all the necessary administrative tasks, the department needed applications that would tie its 146 independent outposts into an integrated, efficient corporation.

DFAIT faced pressures for faster diplomatic responses to worldwide events.