1. Need

Shrinking Budgets, Pressure to Act Quickly

Advanced telecommunications has changed the face of diplomacy. Crises breaking anywhere in the world appear on television sets the same day, dramatically reducing the time available for official analysis and response by the countries involved. Documents carried by couriers in diplomatic pouches, or even transmissions sent via telex, are far too slow and cumbersome for the quick responses demanded in the 1990s. Today, diplomats and analysts spread across the globe must work collaboratively with rapid exchange of documents and access to a common information base.

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. In addition to the pressures for faster responses to worldwide events, DFAIT's shrinking budget forced diplomats to do more work with far fewer support staff. Budgetary pressures also forced DFAIT to reevaluate its use of network bandwidth, which is an order of magnitude more expensive internationally than within North America.

Additionally, the costs and logistics of deploying traditional mainframe-based applications made it too difficult and expensive to get data out to the various missions, where the information was needed for local decisions. The home office had no practical way to track individual missions' budgets throughout the year, and no one could perform what-if scenarios or create ad hoc reports to support the fast analyses the diplomatic corps needed to make. An additional worry was that the continuing loss of clerical support staff might diminish corporate memory, which is essential to the operation of a foreign ministry.

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