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FedEx's use of visualization software helps company staffers collaborate more concisely on new software features for online customers **BY THOMAS HOFFMAN**

There are some stark differences between Eastern and Western cultures, including how people from each region greet one another and address their elders. So when FedEx began developing a fedex.com service for the Asia-Pacific market last year, it wasn't altogether surprising when developers discovered that customers there have a different approach to shipping packages than Westerners, such as a preference for filling out the recipient's address before the sender's address.

To help members of the project team collaborate on the look-and-feel and workflow of the online service, the group began using visualization software from iRise. The visualization tools enabled members of fedex.com's design team to simulate what a new software feature might look like before introducing it to customers. They can also use the software to brainstorm with their peers in sales and marketing on any iterations that might be needed before a new service or >>>



FedEx EVP and CIO **Rob Carter** chose visualization software to help business analysts design and test enhancements to fedex.com.

capability is rolled out to fedex.com, says Tamara Payne, vice president of IT for the Memphis-based logistics giant.

The visualization tools helped the design team pinpoint the types of features that customers in the Asia-Pacific region wanted from fedex.com, which resulted in a successful launch. Three months after the online service was introduced it led to an increase in the number of international packages shipping through the online channel, says Payne (the company declined to specify the size of the increase).

The use of the software was the brainchild of FedEx Executive Vice President and CIO Rob Carter, who's constantly searching for ways to help the company's various businesses become more agile.

"The real story that lurks out there, plaguing every CIO, is the complexity of it all," Carter says. "How can we introduce things faster? How do we enable a business to move more quickly? That's where we can create the most value." The ability to dynamically and visually show what a developing product will look like generates "a lot of excitement and speed in the front-end processes," the CIO adds. "That's the primary time when you're working with business."

Since the rollout of the new fedex.com in the Asia-Pacific market last year, FedEx has extended the use of the iRise visualization tools to 200 business analysts, who are using the software throughout the design and testing of all enhancements made to fedex.com. The site is used by 7.5 million global customers. The software "has allowed us to be a little more customer-centric because we can talk more to live examples with customers," says Tom Wicinski, vice president of digital access marketing at FedEx Services. The tools have helped the company introduce new products or features to fedex.com faster while reducing the number of "missed requirements" when new features are introduced, he adds.

FedEx officials haven't conducted a formal ROI analysis on the licensing and maintenance costs of the iRise tools. Still, Payne says at least three fedex.com projects were approved by senior managers after they were able to view simulations of new products being planned, along with the anticipated benefits expected from them.

"When you can show the executive team a product that goes to market ahead of time, that concretes the conversation," Payne says.

Thomas Hoffman is a freelance writer based in New York.

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