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## Marines flex their muscle with SharePoint

By [John Fontana](#) , NetworkWorld.com , 04/11/2007

While the [Marines](#) have been serving in every conflict since the Revolutionary War, there is one thing they have never had at their disposal – a virtual work environment to keep them connected.

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That has changed with the Iraq conflict as the Marines are piloting a virtual office collaboration system built on the back of Microsoft's SharePoint Server and the CorasWorks Workplace Suite, a set of business intelligence tools for building collaborative and workflow-based applications.

Marines playing a support role behind the front lines in Iraq use an application built for the SharePoint system to request supplies needed in the field. The Marines use a browser to access the secure system to request equipment and touch off an electronic workflow process that can be tracked from beginning to end.

Rolled out just over a month ago, this week the Marine system was tracking 119 requests, called an Urgent Unfunded Needs Statement or UrgentUNS, for equipment that the Marines think can help better solve their issues on the battlefield.

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It is the one of the first capabilities that the Marine Corps Enterprise Information Technology Services (MCEITS) SharePoint Deployment, as the system is known, is now providing to aid the war effort.

Creation of the system began in mid-2006 with a design goal of becoming the heart of Marine Corps collaboration, including everything from filing the daily morning roll call to submitting briefings for generals to review.

“The message here is that you build a system that organizations can use to transfer what use to be a physical work environment into a virtual work environment,” says Ron Simmons, director of KM integration for the Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC) in Quantico, Va. “Using CorasWorks, I basically train users to build their own solutions, which range from tracking conference room usage to calendars of events. They don't need a development team.”

Simmons says a prime example for the Marine Corps was improving a paper-based process used by eight divisions at MCCDC to build a daily tabulation of each Marine who had reported for duty that morning. Each division filed an Excel spreadsheet with data that had to be manually collated into a single Excel file.

“When we put that into SharePoint and CorasWorks, it no longer required Excel spreadsheets and the system itself now rolls up the information into a single report,” says Simmons. “Just that little administrative action saves three man hours per day.”

It's the tip of an iceberg, he says.

The system provided similar efficiencies for UrgentUNS, which was based on a Microsoft Word template that was filled out and sent as an e-mail attachment. The approval process was all done in e-mail with no tracking mechanism.

“On any given day no one knew where all the UrgentUNS were,” says Simmons. “Now I can get a graphic showing how many are active and where they are in the process.”

The system lets users create virtual offices and assign users to those offices, which gives them access to the data stored there.

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Data stored in those offices can be “rolled up or down” to other offices using technology in CorasWorks that allows, for example, a general to distribute a memo to all his support staff and troops.

Today, no broadcast messages via e-mail are allowed and Marines sign into the system first thing in the morning to begin their day.

That has helped change the work culture and get everyone in tune with the system, says Simmons. “The users see that this is where everybody is and therefore that is where they need to be also.”

Simmons created a similar system for the Federal Aviation Administration in 2002 that started out with 50 users. By 2005, it had 22,000 users and had been designated the FAA’s enterprise collaboration system and was being used for such tasks as storing engineering drawings and collaboration notes. The following year, Simmons was recruited by the Marines.

“I teasingly say that the FAA was version 1.0 and the Marines are 2.0,” says Simmons.

Just like the FAA system, the Marine Corp version has a browser as the only front-end software needed on client machines and it operates over a secure extranet using Secure Sockets Layer (SSL).

SharePoint serves as the repository and CorasWorks provides a layer of business intelligence.

The system supports both internal and external users and now has more than 1,000 users, with roughly three-quarters of them coming from outside the internal network at MCCDC.

“It tells you that when you build this kind of capability that suddenly people who you had difficulty collaborating with, who you traded e-mail and played phone tag, are now easier to communicate with because they are part of the same virtual office,” says Simmons.

He is now eyeing an upgrade from today’s SharePoint 2003 running on Windows Server 2003 to the recently shipped 2007 version that more tightly integrates with the Office family of tools. ([See Network World's Clear Choice Test of SharePoint Server 2007.](#))

Simmons is evaluating the improved workflow capabilities in 2007 supported by the new Windows Workflow Foundation technology and Live Communications Server (LCS) 2007, Microsoft’s real-time communications hub.

“LCS allows you to have presence or [instant messaging] capability within SharePoint,” says Simmons. “To me that changes group dynamics. Now while you’re sitting in a meeting you can connect to your staff through IM.” He says the goal will be to add a real-time communications element to the entire system.

“I get around to a lot of federal agencies and I can say in government we are reaching a tipping point to

moving to SharePoint as our office environment,” says Simmons.

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