

Case Study

OpenAir Revolutionizes How Creative Firm AREA 17 Runs its Business

A/

Private Firm

OpenAir
modules used:

Expenses

Invoices

Projects

Resources

Timesheets

In the past, creative firms have battled against certain stigmas regarding the manner in which they do business. However, a new generation of emerging design agencies is transforming the creative services industry. A genuine focus on providing timely and cost-effective solutions to their clients has forced these organizations to reevaluate how they run their businesses. More often than not, this illuminates the need for automation tools to properly streamline business processes and enable them to deliver their products within both time and budget constraints.

A case in point is AREA 17, an interactive media agency based in New York City and Paris, France. Founded in 2003 and named after the optical cortex of the human brain, AREA 17 creates user-centered websites, software applications and visual communication systems for their clients. Their services span the disciplines of research and strategic planning, branding and visual identity, user-centered design, and technology and development. They have built up an impressive clientele from such diverse industries as banking, fashion, music, technology, sports, publishing and food services ...

Relieving Anxiety

Prior to implementation of OpenAir, AREA 17 faced a series of challenges that limited their growth potential. How the company managed resources and projects created a general anxiety for George Eid, Partner and Creative Director at AREA 17. “It often felt like we were goldfish with a memory of 20 seconds. If we were busy at any given time, we assumed that we were always busy,” said Eid. This often resulted in a great deal of guesswork when calculating utilization. Now with OpenAir, streamlined resource bookings provide AREA 17 with concrete information to measure company trends and forecasts. “OpenAir has relieved the anxiety involved in measuring utilization. If the company is having a short lull in work, I can go into OpenAir and see exactly when projects will pick up again.” With OpenAir in place, organizations no longer have to hope and guess that work will increase during slow periods.

For a company with offices across an ocean, tracking projects in Microsoft Excel was not efficient or practical. “We had used Excel to manage our projects which inhibited collaboration and mobile access,” said Eid. “I split my time between our two offices and needed to be able to view the most up-to-date project plans in real-time.” Due to OpenAir’s hosted solution, information can be viewed from any internet connection as well as through various mobile devices. Furthermore, all changes in the system are updated immediately so everyone who logs into the system has access to the accurate data they need.

Not only was Excel a cumbersome solution for project management but it also limited the ability to conduct international business. OpenAir provides fully integrated multi-currency functionality that enables international organizations to bill clients with out the added task of manual currency conversion. “OpenAir is the strongest system out there to automate multi-national business and has significantly eased the process of supporting our international clients.”

With a stable system to house resource and project metrics, AREA 17 now has access to powerful reporting functionality. “Project profitability used to be a difficult area for us. It required speaking with our finance team after the books were closed for a given month and then manually measuring cost vs. revenue.” OpenAir provides robust profitability reporting that enables project managers to discuss profitability on a weekly basis rather than once a month. With this information more readily available, AREA 17 now has the ability to identify non-profitable projects earlier and the knowledge to avoid similar troubled projects in the future.

Creating a New Image

Creative companies often have the image of being free-wielding and frivolous while not focusing on the business side of their organizations. “Despite the stigmas that we are often up against, designers are in fact streamliners. The definition of ‘designing’ is to make something smoother and better, such as taking an eight-step process and making it six steps,” said Eid. Similarly, OpenAir has streamlined AREA 17’s entire business infrastructure and taken out the manual, unnecessary steps. This marriage of creative design and sound business processes has developed a new view of how creative firms operate. “As designers we optimize products. Most people think of aesthetics when they hear the word ‘design.’ However, we view ourselves as solutions-givers that can come to effective results on time and within budget.”

By bringing in OpenAir, AREA 17 was forced to define how they do business. “Now that we have a tool that is meant to automate and support our business processes, we have been forced to think through our best practices and methods,” said Eid. “To effectively use the system we had to first understand the best way to run our company.” Through this process, AREA 17 has transformed itself into a goal and profit-driven company without compromising their creativity. “Since using OpenAir, we have inputted planned hours for every task associated with a project, even non-billable time. Through tracking idea meetings, training, and overhead time we now have visibility into the true costs of projects.” This enables the organization to reach the margins they want for projects. Tracking all time within the system has also forced AREA 17 to be better “guessers” when it comes to project estimates. “No matter who you may speak with, whether project managers, designers, or developers, you’d receive the same time estimates for a specific task,” said Eid. “OpenAir is an extremely powerful tool that has revolutionized our business.” By delivering products on time and within budget through the use of OpenAir, AREA 17 has built a reputation as an accurate and efficient organization that provides best-in-class creative services.