

Case Study

Public Strategies selects OpenAir to automate a growing consulting firm

Greater visibility gives way to greater profits

“Client satisfaction, profitability and consultant utilization drive our business. OpenAir provides the invaluable insight into on all three metrics. We are able to price projects so that we are comfortable with our ability to achieve a reasonable margin while providing clients with high-quality services at the right price.”

Mark Bunker
Chief Administrative Officer
Public Strategies, Inc.

Public Strategies is a fast-growing communications consulting firm that helps corporate executives and boards of directors identify and manage public issues that impact their business. With thirteen locations, a recently opened Seattle office and plans for further expansion, Public Strategies needed to optimize the profitability of their 220 employees.

Mark Bunker, Chief Administrative Officer, and Manual Azuara, Chief Financial Officer, teamed up to evaluate 40 professional service automation vendors before settling on OpenAir. Functionality, ROI and integration were the key decision points for Bunker and Azuara. Additionally, Public Strategies liked OpenAir’s solution because it offers both end user and administrative functionality 100% over the Web and supports multiple computer platforms including Apple’s Macintosh operating system. OpenAir replaced a variety of disparate systems and processes including paper time and expense reports, manual billing checklists, manual project profitability calculations and spreadsheet pipeline reporting.

Follow the money

OpenAir has provided Public Strategies project managers and executives more visibility into profitability metrics. As a firm that bills primarily using fixed fee, understanding the cost of delivering projects is crucial to pricing projects appropriately.

“More than anything else, OpenAir has provided the metrics for amount of effort needed to provide value to our clients. Because we bill using a fixed fee, the historical labor and expense costs that OpenAir gives us enables us to price future projects with appropriate margins. In the end, Public Strategies benefits and our clients get the value they expect from us,” said Azuara.

“We don’t want to be in a situation in which we have a fixed fee and then have our staff do three or four times the work that we initially specified. That is a big risk exposure for us that we like to control,” added Bunker. “If a consultant has free time on a project, he or she can now understand how they can add value to the project while being mindful of not giving away his or her time for free.”

Public Strategies is also using OpenAir to give more responsibility to their project managers. With better information on project profitability, effort and timelines, project managers can make better decisions for their clients and for Public Strategies. “OpenAir gives our project managers the information to align their two most important goals: serving the client and project profitability,” said Bunker. “We now have more forward-looking visibility. Project managers and executives can make conscious choices about performing projects that are not profitable. If we think that we need to under price an engagement to win some longer-term profitable business, that’s fine. OpenAir enables that discussion.”

Getting accurate bills out the door

A key benefit provided by OpenAir’s email-invoicing capability is an accelerated cash collection cycle. OpenAir has also streamlined the billing process, ensuring more accurate invoices.

“OpenAir’s email invoicing enables more accurate invoices,” said Azuara. “We don’t want to argue with clients about what is billable or not. We can now track more accurately the charges we pass along to clients. It makes our invoicing process easier and, more importantly, our clients get charged the correct amount every time.”

“We also provide more accurate invoices to our clients,” said Azuara. “We can tell when a client has viewed an invoice and that gives us good information to accelerate our receivables.”

Team management made easy

Public Strategies is using OpenAir's staffing and utilization management functionality to manage their employees in geographically disparate offices. Before deploying OpenAir, utilization metrics were not generated and only a handful of managers reviewed staffing data.

"Before OpenAir, only four managers received staffing data—and we did not generate utilization data—and they were unable to act on the information. Along with some organizational changes, the utilization and staffing data that OpenAir provides gives our managers the business insight to keep our people busy, billing and adding value to our customers," said Bunker. "OpenAir provided the insight that we could boost our utilization, getting more productivity from our existing staff. Despite strong growth in the number of projects, we were able to hold off from hiring new staff. Before, whenever we signed a new large project, there would be a rush to hire folks. Now, we are more measured about hiring and often can avoid it, even while providing excellent customer satisfaction. During strategic conversations about hiring and staff mix, OpenAir gives us the information that we need to make a data-driven argument for or against hiring new staff."

Public Strategies also tracks employee skills using OpenAir. Staffing managers can search for appropriate employees by skill. "Additionally, because it is Web-based and easy to use, OpenAir enables our Practice Group Leaders to identify resources with appropriate skill sets and capacity to fill new project staffing needs," said Bunker.

Superior Architecture with a World-Class Team

Public Strategies found that OpenAir's Web-native architecture and superior integration were critical success factors in their deployment of the PSA solution. "We found that very few PSA vendors provide true Web native capabilities. Among those that do, OpenAir offered the best integration and value. We needed to support Microsoft® and Macintosh® computers. Equally as important, OpenAir offered very comprehensive administrative functionality all using just a Web browser," said Bunker.

In addition to software that provides a high ROI and best-of-breed functionality, Public Strategies has found that OpenAir's professional services and support staff provide excellent account management.

"The quality of professional services and customer support from OpenAir has been fantastic. We've really been impressed with the ongoing enhancement process as well. The staff at OpenAir always has a 'can do' attitude with regards to support and new features. We have a great partnership with the staff there," said Bunker.