



EXGIS EXPENSE: EXPANDING THE POWER OF THE BLACKBERRY SMARTPHONE

BY JOHN G. SMITH



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Having to laboriously file expenses after the fact is the scourge of any lawyer or accountant who travels on business. When it comes to itemizing everything from airport limos and meals to hotel rooms and incidentals, the entire process frequently occurs in a strangely archaic way. Once a trip is complete, a wad of receipts is spread out over a desk to be itemized and entered into a spreadsheet. At that point, a document is printed, signed and passed on up the food chain for approval.

Thankfully, that process is about to change as a result of the recent release of Exgis Expense, a new Web-based expense management tool with a mobile edition that allows corporate BlackBerry® smartphone users to record, track and manage information about their expenses as they occur. With no hardware to manage or software to install, it delivers on the promise of providing near instant access to the information whether travelers are in a taxi, elevator, restaurant or even an airplane.

“We all live in an increasingly more mobile world, yet when it comes to this particular accounting procedure, up until recently, not much has changed since well before the onset of wireless handheld devices,” says Mark Wilson, the 37-year-old founder and president of Exgis Inc. “This new service is fast, simple, reliable and secure.”

Equally as important, adds the Toronto-based entrepreneur -- who took a huge leap of faith three years ago when he left a successful job with Ernst & Young to launch the company -- it can save both time and money.

Wilson, who joined the global professional services giant at the age of only 18 and became the Firm’s youngest employee at the time, knows a great deal about both. He rose through the ranks of the organization to become Associate Director for Global Financial Applications at which point he designed and oversaw the implementation of Ernst & Young’s Time & Expense (T&E) system, a sophisticated piece of software that is used every week by over 100,000 employees in almost 90 countries.

It was an impressive feat, but as he realized early in the development phase, a critical component – the ability to access the system virtually anytime and anywhere – was sadly missing. The accounting firm may be recognized as a supremely technology-savvy organization, but there were severe limitations when it came to the ability to file expenses unless, of course, you were physically in your own office and able to access the T&E system.

“I was traveling around the world expounding the virtues of what truly was and is a great T&E system, but later, I would be on an airplane heading back to Canada and writing out my expenses manually on a piece of paper,” says Wilson. “Once back at my office, I would forward it on to my assistant, who would then type it into the system that I had helped build.

“I had been using a Blackberry smartphone for years to e-mail, calendar and call. It was soon after the T&E system went live that I began thinking of ways in which expenses could be simply typed into one of these devices electronically.”

He left Ernst & Young in 2005 to do just that and spent the next nine months creating a business plan for what would become his expense management tool, and hiring a team of Web programming specialists to develop a product that is as sophisticated as it is simple.

Exgis Expense has a base license cost of US\$10 a month and is based on an Application Service Provider (ASP) model, which is why there is no hardware to manage or software to install.


“A large company or corporate enterprise can appreciate the pains involved in implementing back office systems – in many cases they did it years ago,” says Wilson.

“Today these companies are looking to replace old legacy systems that are becoming too expensive to maintain. They are looking to move to modern technology solutions, which often involve the extension of data to mobile devices usually carried by the company executives.”

Exgis Expense can also quickly and easily resolve the need to replace legacy expense tracking systems. Features include Project Management capabilities (the ability to track your clients and engagements and apply expenses to specific projects), Globalization (multiple currencies with daily exchange rates and location tracking with appropriate taxes) and Reporting (create custom reports for approval and submission; ad-hoc reporting by project, location, currency and date; the ability to export data into a Microsoft® Excel® spreadsheet and transfer expenses back to a back-office financial system.)

With Web services allowing access to the data stored within Exgis Expense, corporations can track their expense data when they need it, allowing complete visibility of expense data to back office financial (ERP) systems.





To get to that point, a number of pieces needed to be put into place. A key component of Exgis Expense is its multi-currency capabilities. These features are powered with up-to-date exchange rates for over 170 currencies, which Exgis receives daily through its relationship with XE, the premiere provider of Internet-based foreign exchange services. XE runs the most popular currency site in the world, XE.com, and provides foreign exchange tools, services, and data to millions of individuals and corporations around the globe.

The other occurred this past February when Exgis was officially named a BlackBerry Alliance Member.

In May, the company participated in the Wireless Enterprise Symposium in Orlando, Fla., an annual conference hosted by RIM, and in keeping with the conference theme of “Beyond E-mail”, was able to demonstrate the Exgis Expense solution for the BlackBerry smartphone and thus extend its functionality as a business productivity tool.

Both partnerships were critical, as is what Wilson describes as the “bridging of the gap” between lawyers and accountants traveling on business and the administrative support staff back at home base. As he points out, it is all well and good that an individual can enter, manage and report their expenses electronically, but what is the point if an administrative staff member is unable to access any of the information that person just keyed in?”

Further to that, the Bay Street Group, an independent research firm, noted in a recent white paper released this year entitled *The Connected Accountant*, that in “view of the need for mobility and rapid access to – and contact with – the client, the value of the smartphone to the accountant goes well beyond the basic performance of accounting procedures: The trend is clear. Local accounting firms fare turning to smartphones to improve productivity, enhance client satisfaction, and become more competitive. Connectivity is a necessity. Mobility is a fact of life. And the smartphone has become an essential tool.”

The firm’s findings mirrored another paper released last year by Bruce MacEwan, a lawyer and author who specializes in business management issues. “Remote access to time and billing is clearly seen as beneficial for lawyers on the billable hour, time truly is money,” he wrote. “The most effective and painless way of fully capturing time spent on client matters is to automate the collection of that information through a CMD (converged mobile device), which will do it on the spot, with no manual re-entry later back at the office.”

To that end, Exgis Expense focuses in on two distinct types of users. The first is the employee on the road who can securely input all details related to their expenses via the BlackBerry smartphone. Once the data is entered, automatic synchronization occurs between the BlackBerry smartphone and the Exgis web site so that valuable data is available virtually whenever and wherever they need it.

The other is the person in operations, who can access that data by logging on to a secure and monitored hosted Web site and in turn download information into a back office accounting system. For example, if an employee named John Q. was in Dallas, during the course of the trip he would input expenses as they occurred via his BlackBerry smartphone and Exgis Expense. Mary Smith in accounting

would then access the data through the server and print out all applicable paperwork. When John Q. arrives back at home base all he needs to do is print his expense report, attach the receipts and sign it.

Add the two feature sets together and an organization gains:

- Improved tracking of business and travel expenses
- Faster turnaround times
- Increased productivity
- Reduced administration time
- Access to current information
- Greater accuracy
- Lower transaction and processing costs, and
- Reduced exposure from faster billing cycle

“With Web services allowing access to the data stored within Exgis Expense, corporations can access their expense data when they need it, allowing complete visibility of expense data to back office financial (ERP) systems,” Wilson points out. “As for the program itself, it is working just fine. “I have people around the world using it including RIM employees, which is extremely gratifying.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John G. Smith is the president of WordSmith Media Inc. -- a business-to-business writing and marketing service based in Ajax, Ont. The award-winning writer is a regular contributor to several national magazines, and serves corporate clients including trade associations, manufacturers, distributors and publishing houses.

The veteran business traveler has filled out more expense reports than he can recall, and always has a trusty BlackBerry smartphone by his side.

