

eGovernment is IT

Ecquaria sees big market in providing IT solutions to countries setting up eGovernment services

Information technology and the Internet have radically altered the way governments relate to citizens and the business community, resulting in easier, more convenient and more comprehensive, round-the-clock access to government services.

This is particularly the case in Singapore, which is ranked among the world's top three eGovernments by World Economic Forum in 2003, and by management and technology consultancy firm, Accenture, in 2004.

Working behind the scenes to make eGovernment possible is Ecquaria Technologies Pte Ltd, a Singaporean software company that specialises in providing solutions to governments and large corporations that face complex issues in the provision of services.

Ecquaria is the chief architect that designed the entire Public Service Infrastructure (PSI) solution that forms the core infrastructure for the Singaporean government's eCommerce initiatives, and has

successfully implemented a number of other eGovernment projects in Singapore. Now, Ecquaria is taking its work overseas, to countries like Thailand, Brunei, the Philippines, and even Botswana.

A typical example of Ecquaria's work involves business licensing requirements. In Singapore – and probably in many other countries in the world – an oft-voiced complaint of new businesses has been that they need to deal with a myriad of government departments for various types of licences.

To operate a restaurant, for example, one might need a licence to use, or change the use of the premises; to carry out fire safety works; to sell liquor; to sell tobacco;

to employ foreign workers; and so on. The process could take months. To begin with, the person wishing to start the business may not know exactly how many licences and registrations are needed, or where to go.

Not any more. Now, with an Internet connection and a few clicks of the mouse,



the person can know exactly which licences are required, which departments he or she needs to go to, and roughly how long it takes for approval to be given. In fact, the person need not even visit these government departments, but can apply for all the required licences online, in the comfort of the home or office.

A project such as this requires very complex interfaces between different government departments, which may be using several different computer systems. Ecquaria specialises in software that links them all together and comes up with a solution that is user-friendly.

More than just providing an enterprise infrastructure software, however, Ecquaria

focuses on helping its clients see things from a wider, customer-centric perspective, taking into account the entire range of a customer's needs.

"We specialise in supporting the 'life cycle' of things," said Dr Foong Wai Keong, Ecquaria Co-Founder, President and Chief Executive Officer. "We consider everything that the person or business might need in dealing with the government or any large organisation."

This is perhaps best illustrated with another project that Ecquaria undertook, involving a state-of-the-art ticketing system for SISTIC, the company that operates a central ticketing agency for concerts, musicals and other live performances in Singapore.

"Before the person even buys a ticket, he has to know what performances are going to be staged, when, how much are the ticket prices, whether tickets are available, and so on," Dr Foong explained. "Buying the ticket itself can involve complex variables, such as discounts for students and

senior citizens. Moreover, the person might buy tickets online, and pay for them later when he collects the tickets.

"That's not all. Many of the people who book concert tickets online are from neighboring countries and they may also require travel arrangements such as air tickets and hotel rooms. SISTIC will be able to offer services in these areas as well. In the event that a show gets cancelled or postponed, there will be issues of ticket refunds and issuing of new tickets. And so on.

"We help our clients think of all these possibilities and incorporate them all into one software. This way, they avoid ending up with 'islands of technology' that are

difficult to integrate and expensive to maintain."

Ecquaria has been involved in projects like these since its formation in 1998 and it boasts a 100% success rate for customer project delivery.

The company was a spin-off from Kent Ridge Digital Labs (KRDL), a leading computer research laboratory in the Asia-Pacific region with over 400 research staff linked to the former National Computer Board (now Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore).

Dr Foong was previously responsible for the entire management and operations of the Java Competency Center of KRDL, as well as for evangelising the use of Java in Singapore and the region.

In November last year, Ecquaria formed a strategic alliance with Frontline Technologies Corporation Ltd to focus on the government sector and key domains such as education, hospitality, health care, media and entertainment.

Frontline is an information technology

services provider specialising in consulting, infrastructure, applications development, outsourcing, support and training. It is listed on the main board of Singapore Exchange and is headquartered in Singapore, with operations in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Ecquaria, which also has its

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headquarters in Singapore, has offices in the US, China and Mexico. It also has an expanding network of partners in Thailand, Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Africa to support the activities of its customers around the world.

Its flagship product is the Ecquaria Service Oriented Platform™, an enterprise software infrastructure built on

web services and open standards that enables organisations to rapidly develop, deploy and manage web services.

Other products include Ecquaria TradeBeans™, a Java and XML-based Internet application that accelerates the development and deployment of business-to-business eMarketplaces; and Ecquaria AuctionBeans™, which can be integrated

with Ecquaria TradeBeans™, to facilitate various models of auctioning.

"We're essentially a software company," Dr Foong explained. "In Singapore, we also undertake system integration work which involves customising the software to create tailored solutions for our customers. In other markets, we just sell our software and leave it to our partners to provide the system integration."

Ecquaria is particularly active in Thailand, where it is working closely with the country's Software Industry Promotion Agency (SIPA) to kick start e-Government projects. In May this year, Ecquaria donated US\$370,300 worth of software, training and value-added activities to help SIPA establish a Service-Oriented Architecture Competency Centre.

In less than a year, Ecquaria has launched three eGovernment services, with at least 20 more planned for next year. These include the establishment of "e-Cities" such as "ePhuket" and "eChiang-Mai", and education projects jointly undertaken with University of Thai Chamber of Commerce, and Rajamanga Institute of Technology.

"We've established good relations with the Thai government and with our Thai business partners," Dr Foong said. "That's why we did so many projects there."

"Our partners have also taken us to several other countries. In the Philippines, we did a project for the provision of services to military personnel. In Botswana, we did a similar project for the police. We had also been appointed by World Bank to undertake an eGovernment project in Mexico.

"Having proven ourselves in these countries, we can expect a lot more projects in the years ahead," Dr Foong said. "eGovernment is the next big thing."

