

Expense Management: from efficiency to effective procurement

**The role of expense management systems in cost control,
compliance and supplier management**

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction: the Case for Expense Management.....	4
Part One: From Efficiency to Effective Procurement.....	5
1.1 The quest for efficiency.....	5
1.2 Cost control, compliance and best practice procurement.....	6
1.3 Improving time management and billing	8
Part Two: The Technology Options.....	9
2.1 Choosing a system.....	9
2.2 Managed Services – the outsourcing option.....	11
2.3 Securing system adoption: focusing on employee benefits.....	12
Part Three: Case Study.....	13
End Notes	15

Executive summary

Travel, entertainment and other non-PO expenses represent a significant outlay for most organisations, but many concede that they exercise poor control over their expenditure. Frequently relying on in-house spreadsheet templates to capture and allocate expense data, their processes are often time-consuming and inefficient, and many struggle to enforce employee compliance. Above all, while they actively seek out economies of scale in other areas of procurement, many organisations are missing the opportunity to analyse their expensed outlays and consolidate suppliers.

This Briefing Paper assesses the business case for investment in expense management systems as a means of tackling some or all of these issues. Taking a pragmatic perspective, it argues that:

- Expense management systems allow organisations to improve **control** and **compliance** by automating several key aspects of policy enforcement
- Automated systems also deploy workflows, ‘self-service’ capabilities and web-based access to improve the quality of data and **reduce administrative overhead**
- Automation generates a wealth of electronic data that can be used to better **analyse expenditure**. With a centralised, enterprise-wide understanding of aggregate spend and the ability to drill-down into the major areas of expenditure, organisations can reduce the number of suppliers used and strike **preferential volume deals** with preferred partners
- This data also helps organisations reassess the total costs associated with other **activities such as off-site training**, and may establish a business case for changes to working practices
- Successful implementation of an expense management system rests, among other factors, on **employee buy-in**. Organisations are advised to take a pragmatic approach that focuses on the tangible benefits for individual users of the system, including greater convenience and the possibility of faster reimbursement

The paper concludes by looking at the core functionality and design issues that distinguish different expense management applications, and examines the business case for outsourcing the process through a managed services arrangement.

Introduction: the Case for Expense Management

Given the long history of business application software use in the finance and HR functions, it's curious that there are so many pockets of activity where organisations continue to rely on manual systems or home-grown programmes. It's almost as if, having focused first and foremost on installing the core engines that manage their transactions, many businesses pause for breath and never get round to starting the next phases of their automation programmes.

Expense management is a good example. Today, most organisations continue to rely on employees filling in spreadsheet templates to capture expense data. Many managers still sign off paper printouts – and even where forms are digitally approved, some rekeying is usually required within the accounts department, adding to the overall administrative overhead and increasing the opportunity for errors.

In principle, this is one area where the argument for automation should be a foregone conclusion. In practice, however, many organisations have held back from pushing through change, even when they accept that this isn't the most efficient way to run a business process. If it's looked at merely as an administrative burden, expense management simply joins a long list of other tactical automation projects vying for a share of the IT budget.

Ultimately, however, expense management is about far more than the quest for process efficiency. Automation brings tighter control to an area of expenditure that in many organisations is startlingly lax, especially when you take into account the high volume of transactions that are carried out to handle business travel and other non-PO items. It also gives organisations the management information they need to select preferred suppliers, negotiate discounts and ensure that employees purchase goods and services cost-effectively. Combined with the emergence of new forms of expense management that are both cheaper and less disruptive to implement, the business case becomes more compelling.

There are a number of different forms of expense management applications available today, but at heart they're primarily designed to provide a centralised system that manages each aspect of the claim-to-payment process. The functional requirements are explored in more depth in Part Two below, but the core capabilities include:

- Automating, centralising and streamlining the end-to-end process, from submission of expense claim, through approval and query resolution, to preparation of payroll data
- Increasing process control, reporting capability and policy enforcement to improve overall procurement efficiency. Where expense management is provided online by a third party service partner, there may also be an opportunity to exploit the service provider's aggregated buying power
- Improving initial data capture (for example, by allowing employees to enter data into a central system through a web browser or handheld device)
- Enhancing visibility into the end-to-end process for both employees and managers
- **Capturing time data for analysis of billing and resource utilisation**

The impact of these different capabilities is explored in the following pages.

Part One: From Efficiency to Effective Procurement

1.1 The quest for efficiency

Although it should be one of the more tangible components of any business case for IT investment, it's often surprisingly hard to quantify how much impact IT initiatives have on improving administrative efficiency. For one thing, few organisations have a detailed understanding of just how much time and overhead is eaten up by their in-house processes, so it can be hard to do a like-for-like comparison. In addition, while business software suppliers have long promised to deliver headcount reduction through automation, in practice much of the 'saved' administrative resource simply gets shifted from one set of tasks to another.

Expense management automation, however, is something of an exception, largely because it's a discreet and standalone process where time and resource can be more easily calculated. In larger organisations, it can sometimes result in direct overhead reduction when automation eliminates roles for dedicated expense clerks or other finance personnel. Elsewhere, while the impact may be spread more thinly between different players in the end-to-end expense management process, it's still relatively straightforward to quantify many of the benefits.

From an efficiency perspective, expense management systems bring three core benefits. Firstly, they enable organisations to improve the quality of data throughout the claim-to-payment process, not least by centralising the data management process. Claims that are submitted on a spreadsheet often need to be re-entered into an accounting system, which increases the administrative overhead and introduces a potential source of errors. Because expense management systems work from one central data source that's accessed by every individual in the end-to-end process, including the accounting department, no rekeying is required.

In addition, web-based applications offer more flexibility in the way that data can be entered into the system, allowing employees to record transactions over the internal network, remotely from their laptop or in some cases, using a handheld Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). The easier it is for employees to record information, the more likely they are to enter data regularly, which helps keep financial records up-to-date (*see also Part 2.3 below*).

Similarly, while home-grown spreadsheet templates provide employees with options to allocate their expenses, it can be hard to enforce accurate data input at a granular level without imposing an unwieldy set of options. As a result, data input may be inconsistent. By contrast, web-based expense management systems allow organisations to impose greater control on the way data is initially entered, making widespread use of pull-down menus that require employees to select pre-defined options.

Secondly, the workflows built into specialist expense management systems automatically route expenses to line managers and then onto the accounts department, imposing greater discipline into the process. This reduces the need for manual intervention and also speeds up the transfer of expenditure data to the finance department. Where individual items are rejected, managers and accounts employees can annotate the reason by using pull-down menus listing common problems.

Thirdly, specialist systems offer greater visibility into the approvals process by introducing an element of 'self-service'. Many specialist systems give employees graphical representations of the status of their claims, in much the same way that it's possible to track a parcel shipment online through websites run by companies such as FedEx and UPS. Similarly, notifications for rejection of individual items are automatically delivered. While that doesn't eliminate the possibility that claims will be contested, it does prevent employees from picking up the telephone to find out basic administrative information.

Each of these improvements helps to reduce the administrative burden for the finance department, which is repeatedly cited as one of the top problems in manual expense management processes.

1.2 Cost control, compliance and best practice procurement

While these administrative efficiencies help organisations shave costs from the expense management process, the most significant benefits typically come from exerting greater control over expenditure itself. Non-PO purchases have long been a source of friction within finance departments, yet few organisations could claim to exercise the kind of control over expense that they exert over other areas of expenditure. During the Internet boom years of the late 1990s, a number of initiatives were launched in an effort to reduce and control indirect procurement in areas such as office supplies, including online marketplaces – but systems to control expense-based procurement have enjoyed a far lower profile. Yet many organisations that have embarked on expense automation projects report significant savings through better compliance, with research from independent organisations showing average savings of around 10 per cent.

The control that these systems offer comes in two forms: reactive and preventative. While some organisations centralise larger purchases or mandate specific suppliers for travel or hotel bookings, in practice most preventative control generally consists of little more than a set of guidelines about the kinds of expenditure that are authorised and the financial parameters. The rest of the approval activity comes after the event, when funds have already been spent. Whether it's on a corporate credit card or personal expenditure, post-event disputes can be stressful for individual employees and frustrating for line managers and finance, particularly where poor decisions have been made on the basis of misunderstandings. More important, in a compliance-intensive global regulatory environment, this lack of upfront control and poor visibility into expenditure may be a liability.

Expense management systems allow organisations to improve both their reactive and preventative control. At the simplest level, they provide automated monitoring to ensure that claims comply with corporate policy. Using pre-configured rules, systems can be set up to reject or query claims that breach price or quantity thresholds, based either on the category of expense, employee seniority or role. Conversely, they can be configured to accept all expenses below a certain level, freeing managers and administrators from the burden of overseeing small purchases. The systems can also be set up to monitor possible duplicate claims – whether made deliberately or in error – and give warning of late filing.

From the preventative standpoint, the systems also generate comprehensive data that can help managers analyse spend across the entire enterprise, better understand recurrent items of expenditure and drive business change. Analysis may show, for example, that an organisation is spending heavily on travel and accommodation expense to send employees from different

departments on multiple training courses, when it might be cheaper to coordinate learning schedules and bring trainers on site, or even invest in e-learning capability.

Similarly, by calculating the aggregate sums spent on car rental from different suppliers, or travel through different airlines, organisations can cut ongoing costs by standardising on one or two suppliers and striking preferential deals. They're then able to enforce these choices through a combination of practical measures – such as drop-down menus on the expense management form that restrict employees' choice to designated providers – and policy decisions, which may include refusing to reimburse spend through non-authorised outlets.

These kinds of cost reductions can benefit even the smallest organisations. For example, as we explain in Part 2.2 below, some software providers offer expense management services through centrally-run systems, which their clients access over the Internet. Because they provide services for multiple organisations, these service providers are often able to use the combined purchasing power of their clients to negotiate significant discounts with preferred travel operators and other suppliers.

These different capabilities evolve into a virtuous circle of cost reduction. The expense management system provides tighter control at an operational level, and in doing so generates better information for analysis about the nature of spend. In turn, this allows organisations to negotiate terms with suppliers, adjust their approved supplier lists and impose those choices on employees through the automated control mechanism (*see Figure One*).

Ultimately, organisations will start to incorporate their expense claim submission forms into a broader employee portal, where employees can also access authorised partners (such as travel agents) online to book travel and other expenses. By managing purchasing from the same point of control as the claim-to-payment process, policy begins to be enforced by default.

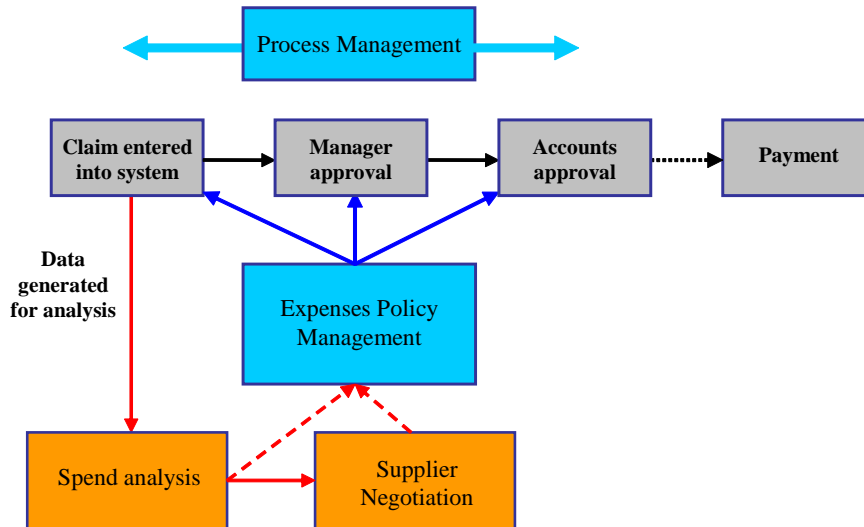
Fig 1: The Process to Procurement Cycle

Figure 1 The diagram shows how an expense management system automates the claim-to-payment process, while also managing and enforcing expense policy (*boxes highlighted in blue*). As a by-product, the system also generates data which can be analysed to better understand aggregate spend in different categories, geographies, organisational tiers etc (*orange box*). In turn, that analysis enables organisations to refine their expense policies and adjust the rules in the policy engine of the expense management system, so creating a virtuous circle.

The aggregate data can also be used to assess total spend with regular suppliers, enabling organisations to standardise on a smaller number of partners and negotiate more favourable terms. These preferred business relationships can also be enforced through the policy management engine.

1.3 Improving time management and billing

Some expense management systems also incorporate time management capability, usually aimed at improving resource utilisation and billing effectiveness. It's important to distinguish this kind of capability from full-blown Time & Attendance (or Time & Labour) applications that are designed for comprehensive operational management, usually in hourly-paid environments, and help organisations capture data electronically, process it against pre-set rules, and carry out different forms of analysis such as absence tracking.¹ In many cases, these systems will be over-specified for organisations whose main concern is to assess how effectively professional salaried staff are being deployed.

¹ See 'Multi-country Payroll and Time Management: A practical approach to improving efficiency, control and management information', published by Webster Buchanan Research August 2004 www.websterb.com

While the capability of these time management modules will vary, data captured by these systems allows organisations to:

- Analyse how effectively billable and non-billable resource is being deployed
- Assess whether all time is being charged out to maximum value
- Determine overtime incurred on specific initiatives for better cost analysis
- Compare resource allocation on a site by site basis

Finally, organisations that bill time to a third party are also often entitled to charge related expenses. By managing both time and expenses in the same central system, it's easier for employees to allocate those expenses correctly to external clients and the rate of chargeback is likely to improve.

Part Two: The Technology Options

2.1 Choosing a system

There are a number of expense management systems available as both standalone systems and components of broader business suites. Some focus on specific aspects of the expense equation – for example, by providing ‘concierge’-style services that make it easier for executives to plan and adapt their business trips, while also providing an easy audit trail. Others focus on the entire expense cycle, from small ad hoc purchases to accommodation and travel expense.

In each case, functional and design capabilities will determine how big an impact the system will have on controlling and reducing expenditure. For example, some expense management systems are designed primarily from the perspective of better financial management, with less attention paid to employee or manager ease-of-use – while that serves the purposes of the accounting team, it may impact adoption levels. The key capabilities of a comprehensive expense management application are outlined below.

Accessibility, ease-of-use and maintenance

Web-based access to an expense management system is a must for most organisations, since it gives employees the convenience of entering data wherever they happen to be – in the office, at home or on the road. Ideally, the system will allow employees to work offline and then synchronise with the central application when they're ready. Support for handheld devices is a growing requirement, particularly in industries where they're used on a regular basis by employees (e.g. by field service engineers).

While web-based design is important, the best interfaces combine the look and feel of a browser (including drop-down menus) with the form-based precision of an Excel spreadsheet. Data entry doesn't require radical screen-design: it needs a practical framework to enter words and numbers. As we outlined in Part One, data accuracy at the initial input stage is key both to process effectiveness and the quality of analysis, so it's often worth carrying out usability tests among employees prior to selecting a system.

Ease-of-use is also determined by the breadth and depth of functionality. Employees should be able to carry out basic tasks easily, such as calculating mileage, and access their past expense history. Many systems also allow employees to submit scanned receipts to attach to initial claims.

From a maintenance perspective, the cost of ownership may be reduced where the system is run 'On-Demand' by a third-party service provider. It will be quicker to deploy initially, since software does not need to be installed on employees' or managers' machines, and ongoing technical maintenance will be handled centrally by the service provider (*see Part 2.2*).

Process management

One of the key benefits of automation comes from streamlining the end-to-end process, removing the need for intervention either from the employee or the accounts department. The workflows that route claims from initial submission, through manager approval to final sign-off underpin process effectiveness, and it's important that they can be easily set-up and adapted on an ongoing basis to cater for organisational change. One of the main advantages of a centrally-run web-based system is that it allows organisations to implement both process and policy changes immediately, since the software only has to be adapted once.

Effective process management also requires visibility into the system so that any participant can check the status of a claim, usually through a web browser. This too reduces personal intervention.

Policy management

In addition to managing the process, expense management systems allow organisations to centralise their policy decisions and, just as importantly, to enforce them.

Using drop-down menus that compel employees to select pre-determined fields, organisations can help restrict expense outlay to preferred suppliers. In addition, using pre-defined policy rules, it's possible to set thresholds for automatic authorisation of smaller amounts, while capping other spending according to role, seniority, region and category.

As with the workflows that manage the underlying process, the success of these features depends in part on how easily they can be adjusted, since policy continually evolves. It's important to check how easy it is for a non-technical supervisor – or a 'power user' – to make any necessary changes without involving either the in-house IT department or the outsourced service provider. The flexibility to configure software to specific corporate needs is particularly significant when you consider how cultural approaches vary from industry to industry. For example, financial services organisations are likely to give greater latitude to senior sales employees than the same individuals might enjoy in a manufacturing environment.

Reporting and analysis

Reporting capability spans multiple requirements at different levels within every organisation, from a line manager's need to compare expenditure against budget to a finance director's efforts to analyse aggregate spend. Most systems come with a selection of pre-installed reports and tools to build custom reports: they also allow users to export data to other applications (such as spreadsheets) for further analysis.

From an operational perspective, the core reporting tools should enable analysis of expense and time by category, broken down into organisational segments such as role or region. At a strategic level, the breadth and granularity of drill-down is particularly important – in order to negotiate preferential terms with suppliers, organisations need access to spending trends over time, broken down according to the kind of services and products offered by each potential business partner.

Integration to other systems

The expense management business process begins with employee claim submission and ends with reimbursement, so easy integration with Financial, Payroll and HR systems is a key requirement.

Where software vendors provide expense management systems as one module within a broader set of enterprise software products, they will usually provide ‘out-of-the-box’ links which make it relatively easy to transmit data into their own payroll and financial applications. Most vendors also provide interfaces to commonly-used third party applications to speed up the integration process. This doesn’t have to be a complex integration, and batch transfer of data will often be sufficient. At the front-end of the process, organisations will want to link to their HR applications so that new hires and terminations are automatically updated in the system, so reducing the set-up and maintenance overhead.

2.2 Managed Services – the outsourcing option

While expense management applications are available as specialist standalone applications or as modules within broader application suites, a number of providers also offer outsourced services to manage the process on customers’ behalf.

Managed services have long been popular in the HR and payroll field, where third party providers manage transaction processing and handle specialist activities such as cheque printing and tax filings. In the late 1990s, the broader outsourcing sector also enjoyed a boom with the emergence of specialist application ‘hosting’ services, where vendors take on responsibility for running an individual software application that users access via web browsers. Although that approach suffered a backlash in the wake of the dot com collapse, many of the world’s largest IT companies now offer ‘On Demand’ hosted services and the model is relatively mature. As well as passing over responsibility for setting up, maintaining and upgrading the core application, one advantage of this approach is that the systems require no software at the employee’s machine beyond a web browser, which reduces maintenance overhead for distributed workforces and allows users to access systems while they’re at home or on the road.

In addition to handling expense-related transactions, third party providers may offer additional services such as:

- VAT reclaiming and auditing capability. A service provider may carry out random checks on mileage claims, for example, to ensure that the number of miles claimed for particular journeys is reasonable. This is something that in practice, few finance departments have the resource to carry out regularly
- **Manage paper receipts. This kind of service sees clients pass all of their receipts and expense-related paperwork to the service provider, which verifies them according to pre-agreed business rules and sends back summary information on who and what to reimburse. Handling this kind of high-volume, low value paperwork removes a significant piece of the administrative burden**

- **Volume discounts.** Service providers can aggregate their various clients' spend and use the combined weight of multiple organisations to negotiate further discounts with preferred suppliers. This gives small and mid-sized businesses access to the kinds of spending deals that have previously been the preserve of larger enterprises.

From a technology and organisational perspective, expense management may be easier to spin off into this kind of managed services arrangement than other business processes given that it's a discrete activity. As with any outsourced arrangement, it does carry some level of risk compared to an outright software purchase, and customers' due diligence needs to focus on factors such as the service provider's financial strength, technology infrastructure, service history, customer retention rate and domain expertise.

2.3 Securing system adoption: focusing on employee benefits

Given that the expense process is designed to reimburse employees for money they've paid out on behalf of the organisation, it's surprising how lax some individuals can be in reclaiming what's rightfully theirs. Pressed for time in the office and reluctant to take on work-related administration at home, employees often allow their expenses to accumulate before submitting sizeable claims. As a result, many organisations impose time limits to force employees' hands, something that tends to reinforce the perception that the expense process is an onerous administrative task.

The latest generation of expense management systems goes some way to tackling this problem, providing an easier way for employees to enter and track relevant data. Like any IT project, demonstrating tangible, personal benefits to the users of the system is a business necessity, since the success of an automated process relies on accurate, timely and consistent initial data entry. These benefits include:

- **Faster reimbursement** Automation typically speeds up the end-to-end expense process, which organisations may choose to translate into faster reimbursement
- **Better information exchange** One common cause of non-compliance is where employees don't understand the rationale for policy decisions. Automated systems provide an electronic means for managers and accounts to communicate policy and also to explain their reasons for querying or refusing individual expense items
- **Faster and more convenient claim submission** Web-based systems allow employees to enter data from their desktop, from home or other remote locations. Some systems also support entries via PDA. These capabilities also mean that employees can enter data offline and then synchronise it with the central system, which allows them to update their expense data in incremental steps rather than letting it accumulate into a major headache
- **Tracking ability** Many web-based systems allow employees to check the progress of claims online
- **Electronic records** Employees have easy access to details of past claims and all associated information (including reasons for individual claim rejection)
- **Reduced risk of tax liability** Expense records can provide important evidence for tax purposes. For example, some systems can upload electronic records for business-owned mobile phones: where employees have identified any personal calls they've made, these can be automatically charged back. This kind of automated record-keeping provides proof of personal/business telephone use in the event of an Inland Revenue investigation

Part Three: Case Study

A matter of months after introducing new expense management procedures for his 220 employees, Mark Siddy, finance manager at Connexions Lincolnshire & Rutland, was starting to think about some of the more sophisticated reporting that he might be able to carry out in the future. Last spring he signed up to a web-based expense management service to replace an inefficient paper-based process, hoping to cut admin costs and improve internal compliance, particularly in handling travel expenses. He expects the system to provide detailed insight into a range of factors, from the effectiveness of travel expense policy to the cost implications of the way that mobile employees are deployed.

A support service for young people, Connexions L&R consists of a network of Personal Advisors working from ten centres around the region. Its employees are scattered across those centres, clocking up significant mileage and a lot of car parking tickets. Prior to implementing a web-based expense management system, Siddy concedes that the organisation's procedures were relatively lax – employees claimed back travel and other expenses on paper forms, an inefficient process that was hard for the finance department to audit, while pressure of work caused some line managers to sign off expense forms without properly checking them.

Since signing up to 'Expense On Demand', a hosted service available from Computers In Personnel, that has changed. Employees now enter their expense data directly into the central system through a web browser, and managers are obliged to check off each item individually on the automated system. Items are then sent to the finance department, where further checks might be made before payment details are exported to the payroll system.

One of the benefits of the new system is that the auditing process gets easier as time goes by. Each trip that's entered is put into a database of regular journeys – if an employee makes a trip at the start of the year and does the same journey six months later, they can access the earlier details online and ensure that mileage is claimed consistently. "The message we're getting through to them is that if they use the database, their claim will definitely go through," says Siddy. "There's nothing in the system that says they have to do it – but they're very aware that we're looking at it now."

In fact, much of the value in this kind of service lies in perception – because employees know that expenses are being more closely monitored, the accuracy of claims is likely to improve. By the autumn, rejections from the finance department at Connexions were running at a rate of around six to seven per cent, mostly coming about when insufficient information was entered on a claim.

Siddy points out that one of the benefits of using a hosted service is that it doesn't prove cost-effective, Connexions can walk away – the only commitment it's made is on a month-to-month basis. He adds that the Expense On Demand system is easy-to-use and intuitive, and the only issue it's encountered concerned internet speed, which was eased when Connexions upgraded its own connection.

Connexions is generating a significant amount of data for analysis, information that could be used in a variety of ways. From an operational point of view, for example, Siddy's team would be able to compare different routes taken by Personal Advisors to see which are the most cost-effective, or investigate whether it's better to buy parking permits in some places rather than individual tickets. At a more strategic level, Connexions might also look at how its advisors are dispersed, seeing whether they're operating out of the best locations in terms of the cost of travel and associated expenses.

End Notes

About the Authors

Webster Buchanan Research is a media and market intelligence company specialising in management strategy and the practical implementation of technology. Combining theory with hands-on experience, it provides independent insights for c-level executives and senior business professionals around the world. Webster Buchanan's primary areas of focus are Financial Management, Human Capital Management, Customer Relationship Management, Workplace Management, Payroll and Business Integration. The organisation is based in London, San Francisco, and Hong Kong. Visit www.websterb.com.

About the Sponsor

Founded in 1982, Computers In Personnel is a privately owned UK company that provides HR software solutions. Computers In Personnel's products cover personnel, recruitment and training administration, absence management, skills matching, payroll integration, data analysis and include employee and manager self-service delivered via the intranet.

The software offers more than record-keeping capabilities, automating time-consuming administrative tasks and promoting a more efficient, strategic approach to HR within an organisation. The data can be reported on, enabling HR managers to gain insight into personnel information at an organisational, departmental or individual level, thus allowing users to create a range of pre-determined and bespoke reports.

Expense On Demand is a web based expense management offering that delivers rapid savings in cost and time around the areas of expense claim handling and analysis.

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