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SAAO reaches for the stars with ApplyIT's OptiRUN

The South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) has expanded its use of OptiRUN, the maintenance planning application from local software company ApplyIT, to manage the maintenance of all the telescopes and facilities in use near Sutherland in the Northern Cape.

SAAO will also become the first Cape-based organisation to implement FlexiLOG, ApplyIT's recently launched operational insight application. This will replace a home-grown, IT-based system.

Last year the SAAO deployed OptiRUN's equipment management and spares management modules to manage the maintenance of the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT); it is now using the software to direct all maintenance planning and execution at the other telescopes and measuring equipment at the site.

Apart from SALT which is valued at approximately \$30 million, there are nine telescopes at Sutherland, owned by institutions from as far afield as Korea, the UK, Germany and Japan. This is in addition to SALT, which is a joint venture embracing institutions from South Africa, Germany, New Zealand, Poland, the UK and the US. OptiRUN is being used to manage seven of the telescopes, and plans are in place to extend the use of the software to the remainder.

Other equipment hosted at SAAO's facility on a remote 1 759 metre high hilltop include a seismograph that forms part of the United Nations' Nuclear Test Ban monitoring network; and the Geodynamic Observatory, which is used to study the dynamic earth.

The use of OptiRUN has enhanced SAAO's ability to manage its complex environment, and to meet the stringent service levels required of the various international partners who have made SALT possible.

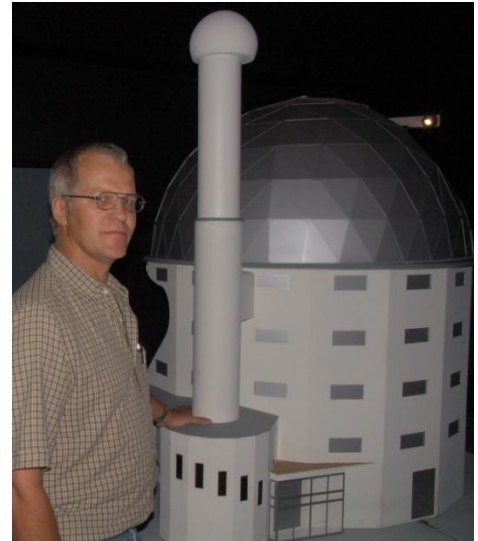
"These partners made it a contractual condition that there had to be a maintenance system in place; such a system was also required for maintaining warranties. But when I arrived in Sutherland a year ago, we had no structured systems for maintenance planning," says Dawie Fourie, maintenance planner at SAAO.

"Our technicians had maintained the telescopes with aggregated head knowledge, and everyone knew what they had to do, but this carried unacceptable risk. All equipment will fail at some time, yet we had no structured maintenance routines or any way to standardise and capture our technicians' and scientists' knowledge.

"We have a high attrition rate at Sutherland as it is very remote, which places a strain on people's social life. Every time someone left, or even went on leave, they took with them all their knowledge of how to maintain the telescopes and associated infrastructure."

After a detailed review of all maintenance planning systems on the market, SAAO chose ApplyIT's OptiRUN for its functionality, flexibility, favourable pricing and the quality of its local support.

"Now, for the first time we are able to capture people's head knowledge and customised processes and embed them in our systems," says Fourie. "This significantly reduces our risk. We now have a system of checks and balances to ensure all runs according to plan."



The software allows both ApplyIT in Durban, via the Internet, and Fourie and a team of 10 technicians/engineers to monitor all systems, 24x7, along with R4.5 million worth of spare parts for SALT.

"The SALT telescope must be up 99% of the time," says Fourie. "Because we are so remote, we need a significant stock of spares on hand. We hold different spares, many of them purpose-built up-front when the telescope itself was being designed and constructed."

Fourie says ApplyIT has been an ideal partner: "Not only did they do everything they could to make their software affordable for us as an academic organisation; they have also provided excellent training and support."

"The SAAO facility in Sutherland is a prime example of how South African science can match the very best in the world," says Gavin Halse, MD of ApplyIT. "It has permitted astronomers to examine and probe Southern Hemisphere skies with unprecedented depth and precision, and make a major contribution to astronomical research worldwide. In addition, it has put South Africa in prime position to win further astronomical contracts. We are proud to have played a part in the success of the facility."

OptiRUN ensures safe, reliable operations by supporting preventative and reactive maintenance strategies, including the automated scheduling of routine inspections and maintenance tasks.

About ApplyIT

ApplyIT is one of South Africa's leading developers and implementers of software solutions for companies involved in process manufacturing. ApplyIT offers a range of specialised business applications to support an operating business, including asset management, SHE-Q (safety, health, environment and quality), supply chain and ERP.

ApplyIT's solutions combine leading-edge technology with industry best practices and have been proven in a wide range of process manufacturing companies. ApplyIT has been developing and implementing software solutions in the chemicals sector since 1995. Through direct experience and strong relationships with the manufacturing sector, ApplyIT has learned the complex issues that companies face, and the many factors that contribute towards the success or failure of software solutions in this environment.

ApplyIT has a dynamic, customer-centric, motivated and highly skilled team of people who comprehensively understand the issues in their customers' industry. In-depth knowledge and understanding of their customers' requirements allow them to implement world-class IT solutions to solve complex business problems.

Contact

Dave Brennan
Sales and Operations Executive
ApplyIT (Pty) Ltd
(031) 275-8080
brennand@applyit.com