

Europe coming together

Central e-invoicing for Europe at chemicals giant Solvay



■ Locations

For the international chemicals and pharmaceuticals group, Solvay, invoices and credit memos are among those document types with especially high volumes and labor-intensive processes. The entire processing of invoices and credit memos for the European units of the Solvay chemicals division is handled via a central invoicing company of Solvay Chemicals International in Belgium and the SAP system operated there. A major share of the processes already runs electronically here. Customers and suppliers can simplify and link their supply chain processes either via the Solvay extranet or through B2B integration (via Elemica, the B2B hub of the chemicals industry).

To optimize this central European process still further, Solvay decided to integrate electronic signatures in the invoice and credit memo process. By doing so they could close the last gap in a totally electronic process and forgo additional paper-based documents. By adding a signature solution of specialists AuthentiDate, all electronic invoices and credit memos can now be equipped with qualified signatures and thus be protected as required by law. The signed invoices and credit memos can be used without additional paperwork,

e.g. for provisional VAT returns. As the solution meets the requirements of the EU Signature Directive and the EU Invoicing Directive, a central signature solution at Solvay Chemicals International completely covers the needs of the Solvay chemicals division across Europe.

Receipt of signed invoices and credit memos was to be made as simple as possible for customers and suppliers. So Solvay decided to install a webservice in addition. The webservice (accessible via www.signature-check.com) permits simple verification of invoice and credit memosignatures. No additional software is needed and the service is available in several languages. This simple solution increased the acceptance of electronically signed invoices and credit memos from the outset, achieving high shares via this electronic process in the shortest of times. Customers and suppliers can thus exploit potential optimization to the full and do not need to invest in signature technologies themselves.



INTERVIEW



Haimo Zekoll, Channel Management
Solvay Chemicals International

SIGNAMIC: *Mr. Zekoll, why did Solvay address the topic of electronic invoicing?*

Haimo Zekoll: We were looking for an innovative and above all customer-oriented proposition to optimize the communication with customers, but also with suppliers. Like at many other companies in the chemicals and plastics business, exchange of invoices and credit memos is one of the most communication-intensive processes. So we looked in detail for potential improvements in these workflows.

SIGNAMIC: *Which processes were at the forefront for optimization?*

Zekoll: Processes always cost money, of course, so we identified various main cost drivers. On the one hand, potential optimization by process acceleration and simplified internal distribution, e.g. in invoice verification, and on the other hand improved data quality, up-to-date status information and avoidance of manual errors.

We wanted to exploit this potential optimization both for Solvay and for our customers and suppliers. It soon became clear that by sending invoices and credit memos in electronic form, without additional paper-based documents, we could simplify and optimize the processes for all concerned.

SIGNAMIC: *Why did you decide to take an international approach to the project from the very outset?*

Zekoll: That decision was quickly taken. With Solvay Chemicals International we have a central invoicing company for all European business units of the chemicals division. The ERP system there, we use SAP here, creates invoices, credit memos and pro-forma invoices for those Solvay companies in Europe. So it made sense to also add a signature solution here for totally electronic processing.

SIGNAMIC: *How did you meet the requirements in technical terms?*

Zekoll: We decided to install a signature solution from the vendor AuthentiDate. The solution was easy to integrate in our existing processes. Apart from that, we could satisfy the legal requirements across Europe with only one signature solution and do not need to rely on stand-alone solutions in each country. The only problem today is Switzerland, because it's outside the European Union and has not yet adopted the European signature laws.

SIGNAMIC: *Were there problems at the beginning with getting the European companies used to the new solution? If so, how did you handle the implementation?*

Zekoll: Like always when introducing new technologies, there were some concerns and uncertainties, both amongst our own employees and at customers and suppliers. These were mainly based on the fact that not enough was known about electronic invoicing. We could clear up these prejudices by simple measures. We informed employees, customers and suppliers about the electronic signature and made technical information, such as legal directives, simply understandable.



SOLVAY is an international chemical and pharmaceutical Group with headquarters in Brussels. It employs some 29,000 people in 50 countries. In 2006, its consolidated sales amounted to EUR 9.4 billion, generated by its three sectors of activity: Chemicals, Plastics and Pharmaceuticals. Solvay is listed on the NYSE Euronext stock exchange in Brussels (NYSE Euronext: SOLB.BE - Bloomberg: SOLB.BB - Reuters: SOLBt.BR). Details are available at www.solvay.com