

Olex Cables helps smaller staff field 50% more calls with new intranet.

Overview

■ Challenge

Respond to 50% increase in call center volume and smaller staff by increasing productivity of call center operators and improving customer service

■ Solution: Integrating Stage

Intranet for inquiries and order placement, linked to backend ERP, CRM and quoting systems

■ Why IBM?

Olex Cables wanted a Java™ technology-based solution; the IBM solution integrated with and leveraged the company's existing ERP system and IBM AS/400® server

■ Key Business Benefits

100% payback expected within 3 years; annual savings of US\$300,000; customer inquiry response times reduced from several minutes to a few seconds

■ Business Partner

Synergy Plus



The Olex Cables intranet has made the company's ERP system more accessible to users by replacing green screens with a Web-based graphical user interface.

When companies in Australia need cable, they frequently turn to Olex Cables (Olex), selecting the Melbourne, Australia-based cable manufacturer for its in-depth project experience and its wide range of alliances with related component vendors. Due to the highly competitive nature of the global cable market, companies also shop around for cable with the best price/performance ratio.

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—Dominic Serong, Customer e-business Solutions Manager, Olex Cables

e-business—redefining the competitive environment in your favor

Key Components

Software

- IBM WebSphere® Application Server, Advanced Edition, Version 3.5
- IBM DB2® Universal Database™
- IBM VisualAge® for Java

Servers

- IBM AS/400 Model 720

As the leading cable manufacturer in Australasia, with AU\$300 million (US\$164 million) in annual revenues and more than 800 employees worldwide, Olex handles hundreds of inquiries daily concerning its power, communications and special-purpose cabling products. Customers call to request price quotes, place orders, check inventory and order status, and obtain lead-time estimates.

Previously, Olex operators responded to these calls using green-screen terminals to access data from Basic Process Control System (BPCS), the Olex enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. BPCS runs on an IBM AS/400 server, the company's preferred platform for its core business applications, using IBM DB2 Universal Database as its underlying data management system. Other Olex applications hosted by its AS/400 servers are a homegrown price quotation system and a sales performance measurement system.

Approximately two years ago, Olex decided to consolidate its distributed call center operations, freeing 14 of its 40 operators to attend to other tasks. Around the same time, the manufacturer experienced a significant increase in small-volume quotation requests, primarily from its wholesale customers. According to Dominic Serong, customer e-business solutions manager at Olex, this led to a 50 percent increase in the average daily call volume. "The complexity of the green screens, combined with the pressure to complete the calls quickly, prevented all but the most experienced operators from providing sufficient information during the call," he says.

Seeking to give its 26 call center operators faster and easier access to the information they needed, Olex decided to replace its terminal/host system with an intranet, using standard Web browsers as a way to query the BPCS system as well as other backend applications.

Looking for a development and runtime environment for its e-business application, Olex evaluated a proprietary order entry and inquiry solution from its ERP vendor, but later made a strategic decision to use Java technology to build a more flexible e-business infrastructure. "We were looking for a globally accepted, open-systems standard, and Java was it," Serong says.

"Using the support for Web services standards in WebSphere software, we will enable our customers' ERP systems to access our order entry processes through protocols such as SOAP. In doing so we will become not only more efficient but also a more appealing trading partner."

—Dominic Serong

With Java technology a key requirement, and DB2 and the AS/400 server as its IT backbone, Olex Cables found that IBM WebSphere Application Server was the obvious software foundation for its new intranet. "With DB2 data management software and the AS/400 server, we realized we already had some of our intranet's underpinnings in place," Serong says. "WebSphere software from IBM completed the picture. We understood that an all-IBM e-business infrastructure would minimize our integration headaches and accelerate our time-to-market."

Ease of use leads to better customer service

Working with IBM Business Partner Synergy Plus, Olex created a three-tier Java-technology based application, with WebSphere Application Server, Advanced Edition serving as the runtime environment for both the business logic and the new user interface code. "The improved ergonomics of the content and layout of the screens have significantly increased the number of inquiries and transactions the operator can complete while the customer is on the phone," Serong says. "As a result, the customer is better served, and the operator has less catch-up work to do between calls."

Currently, each operator handles seven to ten phone calls, faxes or e-mails per hour. Response times for common inquiries have fallen dramatically, in some cases from several minutes to a few seconds. And because fewer call center operators are handling the increased call volume, Olex is saving an estimated AU\$550,000 (approximately US\$300,000) annually in labor costs. As a result, the company expects to realize full payback on the intranet within three years.

A calculated process

To help Olex pinpoint the application functions and features that would have the greatest impact on operator productivity and customer service, Synergy Plus started the intranet project by exploring a broad range of customer service scenarios with the operators and their managers. "Synergy Plus was good at distilling the business needs and then meeting them by applying its knowledge of WebSphere Application Server," Serong notes. "Synergy also helped us set realistic project goals and brought in experienced architects and developers to help achieve those goals."

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—Dominic Serong



Previously, a special order for 2,000 meters of cable delivered in 100-meter lengths would have required manually entering 20 identical line items. With the new Web application, operators can create a single line item for the total length, enter cut length and quantity. Then, the Java-based application generates the order line items automatically.

Using IBM VisualAge for Java (the predecessor to IBM WebSphere Studio Application Developer) as the development environment, Olex and Synergy Plus developed and deployed five Java application modules: price and availability, order entry and maintenance, order inquiry, quotations entry/maintenance and quotations inquiry. The 15-month development effort included designing the Java architecture, creating the business logic that accesses data from the company's back-end applications and writing the presentation code that accepts inquiry requests and delivers results to the users' Web browsers. Approximately 75 to 85 percent of the Java code is reusable, which will save considerable development time in future implementations.

Taking advantage of the support for Java Database Connectivity (JDBC) available in WebSphere Application Server and DB2 Universal Database, the Synergy solution uses JDBC calls to integrate needed data from the BPCS system as well as from an Applix customer relationship management system and a legacy quotation application.

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Web services may eliminate duplicate data entry

Using the Java business logic developed for the call center intranet, Olex has developed a customer self-service application that will enable authorized customers to access price and availability information from a secured area of the Olex Web site.

But Serong believes that the most dramatic customer service improvements will come when the Olex Cables systems can communicate directly with customer systems. "Most of our customers have their own ERP systems and would like to avoid placing orders twice—once on their own system and then again on the Olex Web site," he says. "That's why we have made a strategic decision to publish all future applications as Web services. Using the support for Web services standards in WebSphere software, we will eventually enable our customers' ERP systems to access our order entry processes through protocols such as SOAP [Simple Object Access Protocol]. In doing so we will become not only more efficient but also a more appealing trading partner."

For more information

Please contact your IBM marketing representative or IBM Business Partner.

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For more information about Olex Cables and Synergy Plus, visit:
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