

ProData Helps Adidas SLD Group Score on the Web

by Erin Bradford

Bet you didn't know that you've got ProData to thank for that signed World Champion Indianapolis Colts jersey that you just can't bear to part with but can't actually wear for fear of staining it. You see, it was not so long ago that the company that made that nifty jersey was struggling to find a way to provide employees with easier access to important customer information. The Sports Licensed Division (SLD), a member of the adidas Group, is the company that produces and distributes licensed athletic apparel to various retail customers. Recently, SLD used ProData's RPG Server Pages (RSP) to revolutionize its employees' web-based access to critical info — and that means the Colts will always have a steady stream of those jerseys to sign for adoring fans like you.

SLD works directly with the NFL, NBA, NHL, and select colleges to supply coaches, players, staff, and fans with licensed sports apparel, headwear, and accessories. The company's headquarters in Canton, Massachusetts, employs more than 1,000 workers. In total, SLD has 486 System i users, and most of them are connected via IBM Personal Communications. In addition, 14 users located at independent contract printing facilities connect to SLD data remotely via a secured network running on Domino. Both the Indianapolis i5 and SLD's Disaster Recovery iSeries 830 in Portland, Oregon, run on V5R3. SLD's IT staff consists of 31 employees in Indianapolis, two in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, and two in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

In 2002, as a means of assisting the Event and Third Party group (E3PO) of the company, SLD decided that its employees needed to modify and access information directly from the company's server. Explains systems analyst Corey Restivo, "We needed to develop a website that would provide our associates, along with outside contractor associates, access to information and the ability to perform entry, processing, invoicing, reporting, and EDI functions directly with our legacy system. Our existing system just did not allow the type of flexibility required for this type of site."

But the change would not be an easy one. In fact, it was somewhat trailblazing: "At that time, no division in our company had ever developed its own web application. We were also limited in terms of expertise utilizing that technology. In addition, there were several initiatives to eventually replace the then-iSeries applications and use an SAP Apparel Footwear Solution that was being developed. As time went on, it became apparent that the uniqueness of our product mix — the significant need to mix manufacturing and outside contract printer operations with our integrated WMS application — created significant challenges," explains Restivo.

Getting the Ball Rolling

After SLD concluded that its legacy ERP system would meet the needs of the business for the foreseeable future, its upcoming SAP implementation was postponed for a time. Instead, SLD decided to put some muscle behind its in-house developed iSeries RPG-based system, Sports Apparel Manufacturing and Marketing System (SAMMS). The E3PO

of SLD was in the most need of accessing info quickly, so that sector was an obvious choice to first implement a new solution. So Restivo and a few other brave employees decided to boldly go . . . well, I think you know where.

A project review team of Doug Rammel, VP of IST; Restivo; Brent Meyer, head of the E3PO group; and some bright-eyed newbies in the form of several teams of computer science students from Indiana University (IU) took on the challenge. The students' assistance helped move the project along swiftly. Explains Restivo, "The IU teams developed the original requirements documents and laid the groundwork for the development of the site utilizing conventional web technology approaches." After these basics were in place, the rest of the team began to investigate possible solutions by spending a few weeks reviewing information from three sources, including WebSphere. "The search list was narrowed down by weighing development time for each approach along with its ability to work in conjunction with our legacy application," Restivo explains. He and his team thoroughly tested all of the products by taking two commonly used green-screen apps and using them with each possible solution. The two other solutions required extensive program modification, so the team felt that ProData's RSP was its obvious winner.

Using ProData's RSP, which runs on V4R5 or later, a System i RPG developer can visually create web content by embedding HTML inside RPG. Developers can access the capabilities of HTML and JavaScript while using RPG for the logic and data retrieval. An RSP program can call existing programs on the System i as well as service program procedures. Notably, RPG logic can be "wrapped" around blocks of HTML to condition or modify the resulting web page, and developers can embed RPG variables or data from files into the HTML for display on a web page. Also, RSP's editing environment is based on Eclipse, so developers can integrate the RSP environment with WDSi.

Going for the Touchdown

After making its choice, the team still needed to convince the rest of the company. Restivo spent several months "evaluating RSP's strengths and its ability to develop web-based applications utilizing our iSeries legacy system and base of application programmers, along with the support mechanism provided by ProData. I then demonstrated the test application, and our team discussed the solution with the business owner, our IT staff, and division management." The company leaders were easily persuaded that ProData's solution would better leverage the company's existing environment, staff, time, and money than a traditional web application.

The company obtained RSP directly from ProData and got to work on its web applications. Restivo recalls, "Much time was spent with ProData discussing the product, its features, commands, and development ideas. Our discussions with Schadd Gray at ProData, along with on-site training, enabled us to significantly accelerate our development." Restivo also talked to other ProData customers to get a better idea of how best to implement the new solution.

ProData created a training document, and SLD used it to familiarize contract printer users and internal users with the features and operational aspects of the system. The development team, which engineered the application, was primarily responsible for end-user training, and phase one of the rollout was completed in January 2007.

The team navigated even unfamiliar territory with relative ease. Explains Restivo, "There was a slight learning curve in the need to become familiar with new tools, but with the

introduction of the solution's Eclipse tool, it made the transition from the green-screen set of tools to GUI ones much easier."

Restivo says that the most useful applications of RSP have been the ability to move functions to the contract printer location, employee access to realtime information, and simpler functions than those previously supported by the green-screen systems. He adds, "While it is still too early to tell, the E3PO group has indicated that it has reduced much of the manual effort spent in executing orders. It has also seen a significant savings in generated reports and the distribution of those reports to the proper parties."

SLD is hoping to use RSP to further revolutionize all aspects of its business. Restivo concludes, "I am always skeptical of a vendor's claim that its product can reduce development time and cost significantly, but RSP does just that and is very stable. We were able to develop web-based applications utilizing the existing i5 technology and staff. With RSP, we have no need for extensive use of external interfaces to or from the legacy systems."

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