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Austin Programmers Group's expertise extends client's ROI in DataFlex

Businesses that demand a high return on investment over the long haul from their software applications have long relied on DataFlex to deliver the rock-solid stability - coupled with their familiar custom user interface - that distinguishes Linux, Unix and Windows character-mode DataFlex applications. In Texas, Austin Programmers Group (APG) president Michael Steffano envisions "win-win" opportunities with exactly these types of businesses.

APG designs, develops, builds and supports networked business and web applications, with an emphasis on healthcare services and other verticals. "Our forte is extending the life of legacy DataFlex applications," Steffano says. "We have been programming in character-mode DataFlex since 1980 as a contract development house for companies all over the country." For businesses seeking outside programming expertise in DataFlex, APG provides an alternative that leverages the money and time already spent in developing a custom DataFlex application.

"Oftentimes changes can be made to a legacy DataFlex application that don't disturb the user experience, but provide a more stable flexible platform from which to launch new initiatives," adds Steffano. "We rarely recommend a complete system rewrite. DataFlex shines in this respect since it supports mix-and-match of different databases and coding approaches – even within the same program, and user interfaces."

As an example of how extending legacy systems often makes better sense than doing a complete overhaul, Steffano points to one "extremely large" public healthcare client with a large existing investment in DataFlex procedural code for managing real-time hospital pharmacy transactions.

"They literally had a dozen programmers on staff that had developed this incredibly complex set of procedural programs for managing various aspects of a hospital pharmacy including real-time interfaces," he says. "The problem they faced, and the reason we were brought in, was that each hospital had its own unique needs which required a large amount of rewrite, configuration, and testing on our client's part which drove up the cost of their bids. Their software was causing them to lose business, but they could not afford to rewrite all of it and retrain all their developers. Our solution was really elegant."

The APG team's solution, using the "proven real-time methodology of ACID (Atomicity, Consistency, Isolation, and Durability)," was to write a Real-time System Transaction Manager in object-oriented DataFlex. APG added some transaction queue databases, system control logic, and provided a simple set of messaging procedures that were added to each program through the use of a standard include.

The result is that instead of the client's in-house developers having to piece together a new system for each client, each module automatically registered itself with the system at startup which told the system manager where to pass the transactions. The transactions themselves were "wrappered" so the system just had to make sure they were passed around correctly.

"An added bonus was built-in management analysis of the system since we wrote in such a way that the client could easily define and add reports to the system," adds Steffano. "The in-house staff was happy because they didn't have to deal with the learning curve that comes with adopting any new language and could concentrate on client specifications, the management staff was happy because it was an inexpensive, high-value solution, and the sales people were happy because they didn't lose bids. It was a major win for us that led to a lot more work over the years."

Read more about Austin Programmers Group, e-mail Michael Steffano, or contact via telephone at (512) 302-1574/111.

Read more about DataFlex, the completely portable character mode development environment for Windows Console Mode, DOS, Linux, SCO UNIX, UnixWare, IBM AIX, and Sun Solaris.

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