Mid-Continent Group uses ASNA Visual RPG to solve its premium auditing headaches

Mid-Continent Group is a group of regional specialty insurance companies that write commercial, casualty, personal lines, and bonds in more than 20 states. Based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Mid-Continent Group has hundreds of agents, many of whom are based in Tulsa—but they are also spread out as far away as Florida. To do their work these agents need information on a very timely basis. One of Mid-Continent Group's bottlenecks in delivering agent information was with its insurance auditing system—the process that ensures that the information used to calculate insurance premiums is correct.

As business grew, Mid-Continent Group found itself taking three weeks to complete a policy audit. During this process, the policy was manually handled seven times even before being assigned to an auditor--requiring as many as four people spending many hours of labor on remedial tasks. This is the story of how Mid-Continent Group used ASNA Visual RPG (AVR) to streamline its policy process to vastly improve both its productivity and its bottom line.

AVR to the rescue

Dean Bathke is a senior programmer with Mid-Continent. He and five other Mid-Continent Group programmers were charged with the responsibility of replacing the cumbersome and costly manual policy auditing process. The team initially looked at acquiring a third-party solution to solve the auditing challenge. However, virtually all of the third-party products he looked at were batch-based and didn't provide the real-time information. The lack of viable off-the-shelf packages lead Dean to one conclusion: a new solution, written in-

At a glance...

Customer Profile

Mid-Continent Group comprises several regional specialty insurance companies that write commercial casualty, personal lines, and bonds in more than 20 US states.

Situation

An outdated, error-prone, manual insurance auditing process was costing Mid-Continent Group substantial time and money.

Solution

The Mid-Continent Group IT dept. selected ASNA Visual RPG for .NET and created a new insurance auditing system in only four months (two less than planned).

Benefits

The new system provides a more accurate editing process.

It has enabled the reassignment of more than 25% of the employees previously involved in premium auditing to other tasks.

The job was completed on time and under budget.

Since the AVR-based system's implementation, Mid-Continent Group has seen a 12% increase in the processed auditing process workload which translates to nearly $2,000,000 in additional premiums collected.

Products

AVR.NET, DataGate, IBM i, OS/400, DB2/400 , Visual Studio .NET

house, was needed.

Says Dean, "Having been around the insurance business for a long time we were very familiar with the auditing processes required. Having been an AVR shop for several years, we also knew that AVR would play a large role in solving our auditing challenge. We were comfortable making a commitment knowing that we had raw materials needed to build a great auditing package."

Mid-Continent Group has been an IBM i shop for years and Dean and the team knew the solution needed to integrate well with the IBM i data. Through previous experience with AVR, the team knew that ASNA DataGate, its IBM i database access component, would provide the performance, reliability, and security needed to build the audit process application. The requirements for the new application included dynamic, real-time auditing and work-flow management to make it easy for managers to delegate and monitor auditing. In addition to these "bread-and-butter" aspects of the application, the team also wanted to add additional value to the process by substantially improving its reporting capabilities, including the ability to graph, again in real-time, several aspects of the auditing process. The application, when finished, would have a Windows client for field agents and a browser-based application for the home office employees. Underlying all of these requirements was effective IBM i database access and Dean and the Mid-Continent Group team knew, firsthand, that DataGate did that quite well.

Spec first, then code

Before writing the first line of code, the IT team wrote the specifications for the application. Each team member had specific responsibilities, ranging from doing some back-end IBM i programming, to quality assurance and testing, and, of course, doing the AVR coding. With an eye towards the future, the team knew that the new application should target the Microsoft .NET platform. With specifications in hand, it was originally forecast that the project would take six months.

The Mid-Continent Group IT team is a big believer in choosing the right tool for the job. With Microsoft's .NET, AVR for .NET, VB.NET, the IBM i providing the database and some back-end processes, and ASNA's DataGate getting his application to and from the IBM i, the team had the best of all worlds. Beyond this core set of facilities for building the application, the IT team also turned to Infragistics for its

> *"Having been around the insurance business for a long time we were very familiar with the auditing processes required. Having been an AVR shop for several years, we also knew that AVR would play a large role in solving our auditing challenge. We were comfortable making a commitment knowing that we had raw materials needed to build a great auditing package."*
>
> Dean Bathke, senior programmer

custom controls. Dean elaborates, "We didn't just want to build passable user interfaces, we wanted really well-done, professional user interfaces. For that we turned to Infragistics for many user interface components. While there was a learning curve, the polished results more than made up for the time required to learn the products."

A chance to learn

One of the most interesting challenges solved with his solution was in how the Windows programs acquired their data. Dean explains, "Some of our field auditors are independent contractors and do not have access to our internal network. Beyond that, some don't always have an Internet connection available, so we needed to create a thin Windows client for these users that was able to be useful in the absence of any network connectivity. For this, we

chose to write a very thin VB.NET Windows client that connects to the IBM i through Web services powered by AVR and DataGate. This provided our field users with the opportunity to download data as needed, cache that data locally, disconnect from the network, and keep right on working. At their next opportunity to connect, they could upload their most recent work and download more data for their next audit. Keeping the client very thin meant that runtime requirements were very lightweight, but by using the Web services to get data meant that despite it being lightweight we could still make that thin client be very powerful." With little experience in Web services, Dean and the team quickly got AVR-powered Web services working and populating the thin Windows clients. And because Web services are licensed on the server, rather than the client, the Windows applications required no licensing issues and minimal runtime deployment. Dean continues, "For the browser-based application, we went 100% with AVR. It's mature, does the job, and lets us leverage our RPG skills quickly and easily."

In the end

Although originally predicted to take six months, Dean and the team finished the project in just four months. Says Dean, "The project progressed much quicker than we thought it would. After building a family of core database access components, and familiarizing ourselves with the Infragistics custom controls, the front ends for both the Web and Windows applications were relatively easy to put together."

With the application deployed, a task that once required three weeks, several workers, and many steps to complete is now performed by one worker in about two days. This savings has resulted in Mid-Continent Group to be able to shift 25% of the employees previously involved in premium auditing to other tasks. Further, the lack of work duplication has resulted in a more accurate auditing process. Since the implementation of the new solution Mid-Continent Group has seen tangible results in the form of a 12% increase in the processed workload and the intangible, but equally important, benefit of a huge boost in employee morale. According to Mid-Continent Group, the very bottom line on its new auditing process equates to nearly $2,000,000 in additional premiums collected.

In the end, the Mid-Continent Group IT Team is happy with, and proud of, the results. Dean concludes, "We selected ASNA's products because no other product can match it for its database access speed and its ease of learning for RPG programmers. But beyond that, this auditing project proves that Windows and IBM don't have to be enemies. AVR proves the two platforms can be successfully integrated and made to work on the same team. I firmly believe that both the Windows and IBM i platforms have their place, and AVR lets us keep those platforms quite happy with each other."

About ASNA

ASNA, provides comprehensive and flexible solutions for modernizing IBM i applications to the Microsoft .NET platform. ASNA enables companies to integrate and extend their solutions to .NET, the Web and beyond, while preserving investments in IT and human resources. ASNA solutions are distributed worldwide and used by more than a million end users.

ASNA is a Gold Level partner of Microsoft's Partner Network, Microsoft Visual Studio Industry Partner, and an Advanced Tier Member of IBM's PartnerWorld for Developers. ASNA is also a gold level partner of Microsoft's Platform Modernization Alliance.