LOGISTICS

Customer Success Story:

Web-based Applications at the Heart of the Automobile Supply Market

Versata® Speeds up Portal Developments at Hella KGaA Hueck & Co. by a Factor of Six and Extends SAP System

"Versata is our strategic IT partner to support individual software development. Their technology complements our existing standard development software perfectly. Our customers are constantly making short-term IT requests, for example expecting us to provide a certain data set or application at short notice. Versata is the key to solving these quick turn around problems."

Andreas Liebeck, manager of the competence centre for Portal/Groupware at Hella

With a total of around 23,000 employees in 61 manufacturing plants, sister production companies, joint ventures and trading companies in 18 countries, the global player Hella KGaA Hueck & Co. ("Hella") is one of the giants of the automobile supply industry. The group boasted sales of Euro 3 billion in the business year 2002/2003 (31 May). Its main businesses include lights, electronics, complete vehicle modules, air-conditioning systems, on-board networks and signal processing. Hella supplies leading automobile and system manufacturers as well as the automobile parts trade.

The customers of the group expect optimum flexibility to react rapidly to changing specifications. This can only be achieved with an adequate IT infrastructure. For quite a few years now, Hella has relied mainly on SAP. However, since SAP does not cover all application requirements, Hella often uses systems from other manufacturers, especially when the applications are required with little lead time. In these cases Hella uses Versata technology.

Flexible system for web-based applications

Versata allows users to automate the development of web-based applications. Versata technology includes components for the automated generation of the Business Logic Layer, the implementation of the applications (HTML, JAVA, Applet or JSP), and thus, of the Presentation Logic Layer.

For the purposes of generating the Business Logic Layer, the business requirements are described as business rules in a graphical interface. Business rules are a collection of different types of rules, such as dependencies between objects, validations of object attributes, calculation formulas, and object actions. They are combined to generate business objects used as Enterprise Java Beans (EJBs) on an application server. In Hella's case, this server is IBM WebSphere. The metadata describing the business objects is used to automate the generation of the client applications. The JAVA code required for the implementation is developed automatically using the Versata design patterns. As a result, much less code has to be written by hand.

From Native Java to Versata

Hella's decision to use Java-based programming came to fruition in the year 2001. First, Hella considered using native Java. The decision was explained by Rainer Tichatzky, team leader for Portal/Individual software at Hella, "We realized then that development in native Java was a complex and laborious process. Also, we had to train or employ experts with a high command of Java. We were on the look-out for a technology that generated Java software and we finally decided on

Versata in the summer of 2002. We chose Versata because of its support for rapid, automated development and its ability to allow us to model the layout. Other positive factors we considered included its use of business logic and data models and its use of open standards."

Hella considered competitive offerings and could not find modelling options comparable to Versata's. In addition, Hella wanted a reliable partner that could contribute the necessary know-how and experience. Versata technology was examined in greater detail via a pilot project that involved the development, in record time, of a program to monitor special costs covered by Hella on behalf of its customers. The heart of the application (acquisition and administration of data on special costs) was developed in five days.

Based on the outcome of the pilot, Hella decided to award the contract to Versata. Initial project experience with Versata showed that it was possible to reduce the required project effort from 2000 man-days to just over 300. This impressive reduction was achieved via the use of business rules, which accelerate development and increase the flexibility of change management. According to Mr. Tichatzky, "With Versata, we can speed up development by a factor of 4 to 6 depending on the type of project involved."

Speed is also the watchword for Versata when it comes to modifying existing applications. The system automatically changes the logic at all relevant places in the program, thus eliminating the headaches that usually occur when system changes are required using conventional programming. This Versata capability reduces complexity of system modification and ensures that a change made at one place in the system also takes effect everywhere else.

Andreas Liebeck, manager of the competence centre for Portal/Groupware at Hella, describes how he views Versata, "Versata is our strategic IT partner to support individual software development. Their technology complements our existing standard development software perfectly. Our customers are constantly making short-term IT requests, for example expecting us to provide a certain data set or application at short notice. Versata is the key to solving these quick turn around problems."

Investment Database

Since it began using Versata, Hella has been able to implement numerous applications via Versata technology that extend the functionality of SAP and other mainframe applications used across the company. Versata applications extract data from SAP, process and transform it by using Versata business rules, and support it when it is being re-imported back into SAP.

An example of this type of application is the Investment Database. It generates investment planning data as a preliminary stage to SAP, or as an independent system. Its results are used by Hella controllers worldwide to record, monitor, consolidate and assess investment planning data via the Intranet or Internet. Currently 80 Hella companies use the application.

The application supports various levels of authorization. Level 1 permits all companies in the Hella group to access and record data. Level 2 restricts the recording and correcting of data to certain persons only, and Level 3 supports read-only access.

Before the implementation of the investment database, information was recorded via Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Data was collected, recorded and assessed at Hella's headquarters. It was then manually edited and sent for input into SAP. This process resulted in incorrect data, incompatible formats, and a huge amount of manual effort, all of which delayed investment planning decisions.

At Hella, speed is of the essence. Using Versata the application was kicked off in early October and was in production by mid-November.

Results

Applications implemented by Hella IT using Versata have improved the speed, flexibility and customer orientation of critical business processes. According to Mr. Liebeck, the company will stick to its strategy of using Versata to provide applications which must be quickly implemented and updated according to the individual specifications of the customer. Versata has helped Hella to develop flexible web-based modules by using business rules, which speed up development and improve change management, thus allowing Hella IT to quickly meet customer demands.

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