LANSA Case Study

LANSA puts information at the fingertips of CAST emergency workers

The Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) is the largest child welfare organization in North America. CAST provides high quality out-of-home care for children and develops child abuse and neglect prevention programs in the Toronto area. In 1999 CAST served over 9000 families and 24,000 children. CAST is funded by the Canadian government and has an annual budget of $100 million. CAST operates with 700 staff and 600 volunteers.

Historically CAST used Visual Basic (VB) for the user interface of its Case Management system and LANSA's smart middleware to integrate the Windows environment with the AS/400 database. Because of changed government regulations and subsequent requirements for many additional forms, CAST was facing a redevelopment task that was estimated to take at least eight months with Visual Basic. CAST decided to use Visual LANSA instead and the project took only three months.

Samuel Lee, Director Information Services at CAST, says "To take development down from an estimated eight months in Visual Basic to three months in Visual LANSA is a dramatic increase in productivity. But that was not the only benefit we achieved. The Visual LANSA applications are also a lot faster and more stable to deploy."

**CHILDREN'S
AID SOCIETY
of TORONTO**

The Challenge

Instant access to information and 24-hour availability is crucial to CAST and sometimes literally a matter of life-and-death. More than 45% of the cases CAST gets are for families and children that they already had contact with before. Keeping history is therefore essential. Using the historical information the system needs to recognize the serious cases and give an instant alert if, for example, it is advisable to involve the police because there is a history of violence against aid workers.

Samuel explains how the necessity for 100% availability persuaded CAST to stay with the AS/400, while the forms and text processing facilities required a Windows environment. "To guarantee 24 hour availability of a large volume of data to over 400 social workers is not something you want to do in a Windows environment. I do dare to guarantee availability in the AS/400 environment.

On the other hand, our case management system needs to integrate traditional structured database information, such as name, address and date of birth with narrative details, such as reports about family visits, police investigations and other events. For the text based recording of events, we needed a solution that could offer spell checking and word wrapping, but that could also integrate quickly with data and applications on the AS/400."

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During the mid-nineties Visual Basic in combination with LANSA's Open middleware offered the best solution of its time. The combination provided the robustness of the AS/400 and the easy user interface of Windows. However, even though the LANSA middleware and Repository provided development and performance benefits compared with ODBC, VB still showed its shortcomings in the demanding CAST enterprise environment.

"The development environment was not productive enough. VB did not allow real modular design or re-usable components. We have a high demand for constant changes and maintenance in the VB environment was just too troublesome. We spent a lot of time on trouble shooting when deploying a VB application," continues Samuel.

In the last year, the government's standard for children's aid changed substantially. The new requirements meant that a lot more forms had to be automated and included different reporting requirements as well. Samuel estimated that re-development in the VB environment would take eight months, at least.

LANSA
ADVANCED SOFTWARE MADE SIMPLE

The Benefits

Being a LANSA user, CAST had kept an eye on Visual LANSA as a replacement for VB. Samuel tried out a few forms in Visual LANSA and appreciated its productivity and ease of deployment. "I estimated that redeveloping the Case Management system in Visual LANSA would take only three months. I decided to go ahead with Visual LANSA and we did manage to implement in three months instead of eight," said Samuel. "Visual LANSA had a very short learning curve for both our RDML and VB programmers. For us Visual LANSA seemed a natural progression. In a matter of two to three weeks our programmers were productive." As a result, CAST was the first children's aid society, out of 52 societies, to implement the changed government regulations.

Samuel explains that Visual LANSA offered a better and more productive development environment than VB. "I feel that in a Visual LANSA application everything is more cohesively integrated. Fields, files and business rules are easier to declare because of the LANSA Repository. Forms, such as a list view with built-in sorting capability, are quicker to layout. It is also easier to create custom events and reusable objects. As a result applications development standards do get applied and the system runs much more consistently."

"The advantages were not only restricted to the development environment," continues Samuel "We find Visual LANSA applications a lot easier to deploy than VB applications. Visual LANSA runs a lot faster and is more stable than VB because of better communication with the AS/400 and more efficient memory usage on the PC. Visual LANSA applications seem a lot thinner, because the DLLs are more modular and

Samuel Lee, Director Information Services at CAST.

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What does this mean for the user?

CAST has a screening team who takes phone calls and assess the case for eligibility of service. When a call comes in, the first step is to identify the child or family. At least 45% of the calls are for children that already have a history of alleged abuse. Screening staff can pull up the history by several search criteria and a Fast Track system that gives information about cases handled by other agencies. If there is no history, then the screening worker opens up a new case.

Pat Sisson, an intake unit supervisor, explains "The screening worker and their supervisor come up with the first timeline. Then the intake worker and their supervisor refine the plan. Our task is to assign a case to a family worker for assessment. We get between 60 to 70 cases or 40 to 50 open cases a day. Every case is rated for its severity of abuse and timeline of action. By law we have to take action within 12 hours in severe cases. But because we have all information at our finger tips we are usually out there with a plan within two hours of a call, at the most."

Sue Smith, an intake worker, adds "The ease of use of the system and the ability to immediately input our findings, means the information is more accurate and complete. The new system is also more time efficient than the old system. There is more integration between the forms, which means that we don't have to repeat the same details on multiple forms. The navigation from one form to another is very streamlined and follows the format of my investigation, so it is very easy to fill out."

"We get many calls with very little information and if we are not able to verify the concerns, then we have to close the case. In the system I can see that such calls may have happened once or twice before, which indicates that there is a stronger suspicion that something is wrong. The system gives me the bigger picture and helps me to make better decisions in very critical situations" concludes Sue.

Company and System Information

- Children's Aid Society Toronto (CAST) is the largest board-operated child welfare organization in North America. CAST was founded over a 100 years ago and is funded by the Government of Ontario. CAST provides high quality out-of-home care for children and develops child abuse and neglect prevention programs.

- While there are specific agencies for specific religious communities, everyone who is not covered by these agencies comes to CAST.

- CAST has 700 staff and 600 volunteers. CAST annually serves over 9,000 families and 24,000 children. It has an annual budget of $100 million. For more information see www.casmt.on.ca

- (CAST was previously called Children's Aid Society Metropolitan Toronto, or CASMT)

- The case management system includes modules for a main Menu, Referral & New Information Report, Face Sheet & People Profiles, Investigation of Allegations & Concerns, Plan for Service, Risk Assessment, Safety Assessment, Comprehensive Protection Assessment, 90 Day Eligibility Review and Case Activity. All in all over 100 DLLs and 60 files.

- CAST uses a Novell LAN server, with Zenworks for deployment support.

- Citrix Server is used for remote access to the system. CAST does not use Citrix server for thin client deployment, but only for point-to-point communication and Internet access to the system

- CAST uses a Model 620 for operations and development. There are 700 users on the system, of which 400 users are using the Visual LANSA application.

- All text handling, such as selecting fonts, word wrapping and spell checking happens in Visual LANSA. All text is stored in 256 length character fields on the AS/400. On retrieval the fields are concatenated back to the memorandum field in Visual LANSA.

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