LANSA Case Study

Metropolitan Associates renews with Visual LANSA

Metropolitan Associates, is a residential real estate firm managing over 4,500 apartment homes in Southeast Wisconsin, USA. A LANSA user since 1992, Metropolitan has developed virtually all its systems in LANSA and recently rebuilt its 20-year old property management system with Visual LANSA. The new system offers far more functionality, integration with MS Office and other Windows applications using Active-X, as well as a more attractive and productive GUI for the business users.

Jeff Dremel, VP technology at Metropolitan Associates, says, "I'm very pleased we made the choice to go with LANSA in 1992. Overall, IT expense is not in hardware or software, it is in people. Visual LANSA allows us to be much more productive. But you should not measure productivity in project development time only. We produced a far more functional and robust system. That is where the real gain is."

Meeting Government Regulations

About 50 percent of Metropolitan Associates' portfolio is subsidized housing for the disabled, elderly and other disadvantaged income groups. Each month Metropolitan has to transmit data to the Wisconsin Housing Economic Development Authority that is responsible for administering subsidized housing contracts.

"Technology plays a huge role on that side of the business, because of the many government regulations and strict reporting requirements," explains Dremel.

"As each household moves in, Metropolitan has to perform an elaborate certification process to determine their rental subsidy based on a plethora of ever-changing factors."

"This process is repeated annually or if the resident's situation changes. Often the subsidy needs to be computed retroactively."

Maintaining and enhancing Metropolitan's existing RPG-based property management solution that had grown with Metropolitan from an IBM System 3, to System 34, to System 36 and then to an iSeries, was becoming increasingly difficult.

The original property management system and network infrastructure did not allow staff at the apartment communities to effectively use the system.

"Our staff in the field could not perform essential tasks in a timely fashion. Move-ins, move-outs, leases,

Jeff Dremel, vice president technology at Metropolitan Associates demonstrates credit card swiper used by staff at the apartment communities.

"Staff now take a prospective resident from the beginning to the end in real time."

payments were all handled centrally at our home office," says Dremel.

"We had a substantial delay because things had to be written down, papers faxed or couriered and data keyed-in. Accuracy was also a problem. I imagine we lost a fair amount of business over the years because the system was never up-to-date."

"I wanted to push data entry out to the staff at the apartment communities where it belongs. I also wanted to take a fresh look at user interface, platforms, operating systems and tools," says Dremel.

Moving to Visual LANSA

The subsidized housing requirements made it difficult to find a packaged solution and Dremel also found most packaged solutions were weak in repair, maintenance and purchasing. "Even if we included solutions on every single platform, we still couldn't get what we wanted."

So, Dremel decided to develop a new system with his own team. In 1992, Metropolitan had selected LANSA as its prime development tool. "We did our research and kept on hearing from companies that use LANSA how they became productive quickly and could deliver complex and large operational systems from the start," Dremel recalls.

Metropolitan also implemented the General Ledger and Cash Management modules from Gemma's ERP system, which are now modules in LANSA's ERP Frameworks. Next Metropolitan developed several custom systems in LANSA including accounts payable and purchasing systems.

"All systems were green screen until 2000, when the big choice of redeveloping the core property management system came along. I considered different user interfaces and took a hard look at platform options. We decided to stay on the iSeries for several reasons. At the top of the list were reliability and low cost of ownership."

Dremel also decided Windows was the most intuitive and feature-rich user interface and decided to move his team forward from LANSA for iSeries to Visual LANSA.

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"LANSA has always worked well for us and Visual LANSA allowed us to take advantage of new technologies. Furthermore we could leverage existing LANSA skills."

Metropolitan's first Visual LANSA project was a new prospects and applicants system. The prospect system stores details of people interested in renting and allows for property searches based on their preferences. The applicant system handles the entire application process, including filling out electronic application forms and the screening process.

The new systems were then integrated with the core property management system.

"We knew we were going to totally revamp the old system, but at that stage we were still reliant on it for all financial transactions. Having half the system in green screen and half in Windows, our users were anxious to have us do the rest."

"Metropolitan then embarked on the second phase, replacing the core system modules that deal with government reporting and regulations, residents and financial transactions," says Dremel.

An End-to-end Solution

"Staff at the apartment communities can now take a prospective resident from the beginning to the end, including property search, application, certification, payment, move-in and associated services. They can also do move-outs and on-site inspections. It is in real time and is very quick with our broadband WAN," says Dremel.

"Timeliness and accuracy has increased tremendously. Before field staff could not always take proper action, because they could not rely on the accuracy of the information."

"The solution includes an alert sub-system, to make sure the correct workflow is followed and to show overdue payments, evictions, late move-outs and other matters that need attention. Alerts are a big hit with our users."

"We also have the ability to offer additional services, opening

Metropolitan corporate office, Milwaukee Wisconsin.

"LANSA's use of ActiveX opens up thousands of affordable programs."

up an exciting new business area. For example, residents can indicate which newspapers they want delivered and on which days of the week. We set up subscriptions directly for these third-party services."

"All Visual LANSA applications run from integrated Citrix servers on our downtown iSeries, so we don't install or maintain software on individual PCs. We can easily add another apartment community. All we do is get PCs, a Cisco Concentrator, broadband service, connect it up and they are plugged in."

"The Windows user interface is far more productive and superior to green screens. It is also easier to support the users, as we can take control of someone's PC remotely if they have a problem or need training."

"We make extensive use of Visual LANSA's integration with ActiveX to interact with Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. We produce professional looking graphical statements, letters and reports on very affordable laser printers."

"I can now consider iSeries and Windows applications. The only caveat is that we want the keep the data on the iSeries server, where we know it is safe. The integrity and security of our database is paramount."

"At the same time, LANSA's ability to use ActiveX opens up hundreds of thousands of very affordable and very functional widgets and programs to pick from."

"For example, we integrated a free ActiveX component as part of Payflow Pro, a credit card processing package from Verisign."

Delivering Cost-effective Solutions

"All our systems, except payroll, are written in LANSA," says Dremel. "Maintaining and enhancing those systems is critical to our business."

"Some upcoming projects include EFT, direct deposit, bar coding and scanning, inventory control and tracking, preventative maintenance and fixed asset depreciation."

"We are also looking at implementing a Wireless PDA work order system to replace the largely paper-based system used by our 30 maintenance technicians."

"The beauty of LANSA is that we can pick and choose which platform, hardware and software delivers the most cost-effective solution based on our business requirements."

"When I hire new people, they pick up LANSA very quickly. The learning curve can be as short as a month or two. Getting new developers productive as fast as possible saves Metropolitan a considerable amount of time and money," concludes Dremel.

Company and System Information

- Established in 1965, Metropolitan Associates provides residential, corporate, senior and family subsidized housing throughout the Greater Milwaukee area in the USA. Currently the company manages over 4,500 apartment homes.
  For more information visit www.metapts.com
- Metropolitan's development team consists of three full time developers. Metropolitan has an iSeries model 270. The Visual LANSA applications are served from two integrated Windows 2003 Citrix servers on Metropolitan's head office iSeries to over 70 users in eight apartment communities and the head office. These integrated IBM eServer® iSeries IXA and IXS xSeries servers let Metropolitan run heterogeneous Windows and Linux servers from a single iSeries footprint. All Windows and iSeries systems backup is centralized. The client PCs connect using broadband over Cisco VPN equipment.

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