



Stanley Kritzik, pictured near Milwaukee's landmark art museum, says new efficiencies have helped Metropolitan Associates keep expenses flat.

the ART of CONVENIENCE

Metropolitan Associates makes life easier for staff and renters

BY JIM UTSLER
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PHOTOS BY JAMES SCHNEPF

CONVENIENCE. It's not just for fast food anymore. More and more companies are ensuring it applies across their businesses, whether it's online banking, self-service bill pay or one-click shopping. And consumers are flocking to such services. ¶ Even rental-housing providers such as Metropolitan Associates are getting into the game. The company lets renters pay their monthly bills over the Internet with a few simple clicks. Prospective renters can also look up properties on an online map to see how far, for instance, those properties might be from where they work. ¶ As with many upgrades, these convenience features were driven by in-house need and then pushed out to a wider audience. Metropolitan Associates began examining ways to improve the dialogue between its properties and headquarters. Once it got that down—thanks to several key tools from LANSA—it began looking at an even bigger picture. ¶ Now, its computing convenience applies across the business, from sales offices to its back-end IBM Power* technology-based system and to renters and vendors. And it's all seamless, with both internal and external users now simply employing a Web interface for tasks that in the past might have required a stamp and an envelope or a call to an office manager. >



A Long Process

Headquartered in Milwaukee, the 50-plus-year-old Metropolitan Associates specializes in residential rental units, including one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. It has some 4,500 such units in 20 complexes across southeast Wisconsin.

Although the general U.S. housing market is in a slump, the rental market is doing quite well, according to Stanley Kritzik, managing partner of Metropolitan Associates. "Right now, our occupancy rate is actually quite high," he says, noting that around half of the apartments are government subsidized for low-income families.

Much of the business is run in a multiplatform environment that includes a new Power Systems* 720 (recently upgraded from an IBM System i* 520) running Visual LANSA-generated applications and an IBM BladeCenter* chassis hosting 13 Intel* blades. Together, these two systems form the linchpin for the company's front- and back-end processing, with the Windows* environment accessing the data stored within DB2* for i on the 720. LANSA for iSeries* administratively controls the data.

This wasn't always the case. In the past, each residential complex used onsite desktop systems that weren't

networked back to the company's headquarters, resulting in many paper forms. When prospective renters came in to apply for an apartment, their information had to be couriered or faxed to the central office for processing. This inevitably caused delays in application approvals.

"We'd get the information, key it into our system, print out the lease documents and send them back to the remote sites. The prospective tenants would then have to come back to the complex to sign the documents, which would then have to be returned to us. This process took two to three days to complete, and we probably lost some business because of it," Kritzik says.

Additionally, all pertinent data was stored in a silo at the company's headquarters. If a remote location needed information regarding a tenant or unit, it would have to call the central office. This unnecessarily burdened the company's clerical support staff, who had to stop what they were doing to honor on-the-spot requests.

Getting There

To counter this, Metropolitan Associates decided it needed to tie its remote locations back to the central office via a secure Internet connection. This would ameliorate many of the

issues related to timeliness and support requests. The question was how to best accomplish it.

The company examined several options, including straight-up 5250 access to the back-end system, as well as screen scraping for a somewhat more intuitive Web-based user experience. In the end, though, it decided that using Windows in a blade environment would be more practical. So it purchased the BladeCenter chassis, installed the Windows 2003 server software and deployed Citrix to enable VPN-based communications between locations.

It also decided to use Visual LANSA to create a conduit between DB2 and the Windows environment. Now, when a call is made from a remote location, the data is delivered from DB2 to the Windows servers and presented to users in a thin-client-based Windows interface. Conversely, information pushed from remote locations is channeled from the Windows servers to DB2.

Up close

CUSTOMER: Metropolitan Associates

HEADQUARTERS: Milwaukee

BUSINESS: Rental housing

CHALLENGE: Improving data communications

SOLUTION: Using Windows on an IBM BladeCenter solution and several LANSA tools to facilitate data transfers between remote sites and the company's back-end IBM Power Systems 720

HARDWARE: An IBM BladeCenter H chassis and an IBM Power 720

SOFTWARE: Visual LANSA, LANSA for the Web, LANSA for iSeries and IBM DB2 for i

This has allowed the company to reduce its reliance on paper documents. Now, rental agents can send applicant information directly to the company, have it reviewed and receive a prompt response, thereby eliminating that two- to three-day turnaround time. And prospective

residents can sign their paperwork immediately, so the company doesn't have to worry about losing business in the meantime.

Also, thanks to the ease of data exchange, all of the company's data is current, from when it's entered at a property to when it arrives in DB2.

This is in contrast to the paper-based method, where data might not be current until several days later, after someone had keyed the information into the company's systems. Property managers can look up account information, including rental payment histories, that's accurate, up-to-date

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and—because Metropolitan Associates doesn't keep live data on its Web servers—at most only a day old.

Everything on the i

The requirement for accurate data also comes into play when Metropolitan Associates is dealing with the government agencies that oversee subsidized housing. As Kritzik explains, the company sends electronic documents to those agencies, and must be confident the data is accurate. “After all, they're paying some of the rent for our subsidized renters, and we want to make sure we get paid on time and for the right amount,” he says.

Additionally, all company data now resides solely on the Power 720 and not on remote PCs, as some noncritical data had in the past. “Everything is on the 720, so when we get a request from the Windows side, it all comes from there,” Kritzik says. “That also makes backing things up much easier, because we only have to deal with one system.”

As an added bonus, none of the company's live production data is presented via the Windows Web servers. Instead, only a mirrored copy of the previous night's data is made available for viewing. This was key, because the company has been using LANSA for the Web to develop several convenient online self-help tools for its residents, such as online rental payments. (Other functionality, including submitting maintenance requests, is on Kritzik's to-do list.)


“We want to make sure our data never gets hacked, so we use LANSA for the Web to only present mirrored data so residents can look at their most recent rent status without touching

production data. This also applies to vendors that do business with us. They can look at their purchasing and accounts-payable information, but that's basically a copy of the previous night's data.” Kritzik says. “So we don't expose our live data to the Web at all, and even then, users need to have the proper authentication to access what's available.”

Intelligent Engineering

Thanks to some clever engineering and the use of Visual LANSA and LANSA

for the Web, Metropolitan Associates can offer convenience for both its internal and external users. All the while, it's also kept its operating costs in line with its income.

“We haven't really raised our rent rates in several years because of the economy, but we've been fortunately able to hold our expenses flat as well because we're getting more productivity out of our people,” Kritzik says. “In the end, it really comes down to spotting potential issues and then addressing them in an intelligent manner. I think we've done a good job of that here.” 



Jim Utsler, *IBM Systems Magazine* senior writer, has been covering technology for nearly 20 years.