



# LIVING LEGACIES

<<MINCRON SOFTWARE SYSTEMS MODERNIZES ITS APPLICATIONS USING RAMP FROM LANSA>>

BY JIM UTSLER \*\*\* PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD SPOTH

MSS's Greg Johnson (left), team leader for new technology, and Greg Neal, director of product development, recently upgraded their company's UIs.

**I**n today's disposable consumer market, old is often perceived as bad. With the advent of CDs, for example, everyone rushed to replace their vinyl and cassette recordings, believing a digital format was superior to analog. That is, except for the audiophile purists who, to this day, rummage through record bins.

Some companies view their green-screen applications in the same light, as a gray-mare technology that must be replaced—especially in the face of newer UIs, software and devices. But should they? Not according to Mincron Software Systems (MSS).

In response to increased calls for improved interfaces and greater Windows\* integration, MSS has been busy revitalizing its legacy applications, realizing that every line of code represents years of collective developer knowledge built upon time-tested and proven business solutions. To that end, the company has been using LANSA's RAMP application-modernization toolset to give its customers what they want while leveraging decades of work.

Although MSS is an ISV and has a marketing stake in modernizing applications, its success proves that even in-house developers can—and maybe should—view legacy code for what it is: a strong foundation on which they can propel their businesses into the future, proving that “old” isn't necessarily synonymous with “bad.”

### A Great Deal

MSS has been in business since 1979, originally offering software-consulting services in the New York area. In 1983, it extended its business reach into software development with a wholesale/distribution ERP solution. Since moving to Houston in 1989, the company has dramatically grown its customer base to include Fortune 500 companies and small to midsize businesses across the U.S. and Canada.

Its products, which include MSS/HD (Hardgoods Distribution), MSS/LM (Light Manufacturing) and MSS/WM (Warehouse Management), are geared toward the hard-goods wholesale distribution industry, according to Greg Neal, MSS's director of product development. “That would include customers who distribute nonperishable products to markets such as the HVAC, plumbing, electrical, pipe/valve/fitting, and industrial products markets, among others.”

The flagship MSS/HD assists the company's customers with accounts receivable and payable, general ledger, sales-order entry, purchasing, inventory control and pricing. About the only things it doesn't do are payroll and human resources. Its other products, MSS/LM and MSS/WM, do essentially what their names imply, helping companies manage both manufacturing and warehousing.

Notably, MSS provides its customers with all of the source code

for its products, which run exclusively on IBM Power Systems\* technology running IBM i. As Neal explains, “No packaged solutions are a complete, 100 percent fit for every organization. So instead of having our customers wait until we come out with new releases that may contain some functionality that might have been missing in a previous release, we allow our customers to make changes as they see fit. Often, though, those customers will feed their modifications back to us so we can add them into our official releases. This is a great deal for everyone.”

## UP\_CLOSE

**CUSTOMER:** Mincron Software Systems

**HEADQUARTERS:** Houston

**BUSINESS:** Develops ERP solutions for wholesale hard-goods distributors

**CHALLENGE:** Keep its legacy RPG code relevant in a competitive market

**SOLUTION:** Uses RAMP from LANSA to improve application interfaces and extend functionality

**HARDWARE:** Power Systems technology running IBM i

**SOFTWARE:** RAMP from LANSA

Green-screen software solutions may soon go the way of old record albums, but Greg Neal (left) and Greg Johnson recently worked toward an easy transition to more modern UIs for their company, MSS.



Because the MSS solutions run on Power Systems servers, the company has its own, hosting three LPARs. One is for primary development; another for training, education and sales demonstrations; and the third for remote connections, which acts as a secured gateway for communications from MSS to its customers.

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**-Greg Neal, director of product development, MSS**

### Remaining Competitive

One of the benefits to MSS's solutions is they are time-tested, and developers—both within the company and as part of its code-sharing initiative—have put decades' worth of work into them. This has made the solutions innovative and battle-hardened, with existing and new customers recognizing just how valuable these tools are.

But as Neal points out, today's users have come to expect more than a fully functional green-screen application. "I would venture to say that it's nearly impossible for software companies to survive much longer by marketing green-screen solutions. Some of our customers, for example, want to know how they can remain competitive, how they can attract the people they want working for them, how they can make their employees more productive," he says.

It's not a matter of simply pushing out a prettier application interface to its customers, though. In fact, MSS sees much broader implications—and opportunities. It knows, for example, that its applications already have strong underpinnings, so there's no reason to make dramatic alterations to the back end. It also knows that today's users have certain expectations beyond simple tabbing and entering, especially given today's integrated devices.

"People have become accustomed to certain things, especially in a Windows environment. They're used to having email and Outlook tied in to other applications. They're used to having Web access and the ability to download data between the Internet and host systems—things that RPG-based green-screen environments don't necessarily lend themselves to," Neal says.

### Evolution vs. Revolution

With those and other thoughts in mind, MSS decided it needed to not only reface its core applications, but add functionality. Of course, the company didn't even consider rewriting its code. That would've been a waste of perfectly good RPG, not to mention time and money. It did, however, briefly consider screen scraping, but the company knew additional functionality was key to ongoing success.

"For the sake of our business, we had to do more than make things look pretty," says Greg Johnson, MSS team leader for new technology. "We actually needed to change the system to give ourselves the ability to build new features and functions that we wouldn't be able to do with just RPG code."

To that end, the company looked at several modernization toolsets, including online, in technical journals and at user groups, before deciding on LANSA's RAMP. The choice was fairly simple, as Neal describes: "It would allow us to change by evolution rather than revolution." This meant the company could quickly modernize the look and feature set of its applications while retaining every line of RPG code.

"We wouldn't have to change it, we wouldn't have to break it into smaller chunks, and we wouldn't have to retest and debug everything," Johnson says. "It's really the best of all worlds, with RAMP allowing us to reuse what we already had and removing the ceiling as far as what we can develop going forward. So now, if our customers want us to do something, whether it's something regarding Windows and Outlook or

the Web, we can simply plug it into our core application."

This is in stark contrast to simple refactoring technologies that improve the look of the software, but don't change its functionality. Navigation, for example, would still operate the same way the green-screen version does; users would still have to tab and enter on one page or visit multiple pages to do their work.

MSS, for its part, changed this—without touching the code—to improve how people work, creating shortcuts and more streamlined workflows. "The RAMP framework allows our users to work just as they do in Windows. They click on buttons or pull on menu items and the framework automatically knows what that action means and where users want to go," Neal says.

This may sound like one of those too-easy-to-be-true scenarios, but it's not. Within three months of having

signed a contract with LANSA, MSS had a working version of its MSS/HD (now dubbed MyHD) ready for sales-team demonstrations and, shortly thereafter, for its first customer beta testing. In less than a year, it had modernized its entire 2,200-plus green screens and gone to its second beta testing site. Two months after that, MSS signed its first MyHD customer.

### Important Assets

Although MSS's use of RAMP was clearly a marketing business decision, both Neal and Johnson stress that in-house developers could use the same philosophies and methodologies in their own modernization efforts. The pair points to five of the six criteria they used when choosing a tool as proof of that. (The sixth criterion had to do with product marketability, which may not apply to in-house development efforts.)