



MCL Group

▶ E-Business, Enterprise-Wide Data Sharing

About MCL Group

With sales of over £500 million, MCL Group imports, distributes and sells over 30,000 Mazda and 5,000 Kia automobiles throughout the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland every year. From its five facilities, MCL services a network of 300 franchised Mazda and Kia dealers. The company uses Transformation Server from DataMirror Corporation to enable a range of new applications that streamline operations and maximize efficiency.

MCL Group uses two IBM AS/400s to maintain the databases it needs to track inventory and run day-to-day business operations. "The AS/400 is very solid and is probably the most reliable database platform available," comments Neil Gibson, IT Project Manager at MCL. "But the database structures do not always lend themselves to newer applications." MCL selected Windows NT as the server of choice for a host of new business solutions, including a dealer communications system, stock flow management system and an automated faxing utility.

However, the selection of Windows NT left Gibson with a dilemma. How could MCL effectively share legacy data housed on the AS/400 with new Windows NT-based applications? DataMirror Transformation Server provides the answer.

MCL Group Considers The Options

Before discovering Transformation Server, developers at MCL implemented a trial system in which Windows NT-based SQL Servers accessed AS/400 data through ODBC middleware running on the AS/400. The results were unacceptably slow, averaging over ten seconds for systems connection and another five seconds for data retrieval.

MCL Group also evaluated other AS/400 data access tools. "While there are some AS/400 connectivity products that can provide adequate record level access from within Visual Basic client/server programs, these would have trapped us into non-standard solutions," says Gibson.

Then Gibson saw a presentation of DataMirror Transformation Server and was impressed with its performance. "Transformation Server could not only move the data with impressive speed, it could change the data format and perform computations on the fly. It proved that it could do everything that we needed."

Transformation Server Provides the Solution

DataMirror Transformation Server is an innovative replication software tool that provides users with the flexibility to easily move and continuously synchronize enhanced data between Microsoft SQL Server databases and IBM AS/400 systems without the need to restructure or reprogram the applications that run the business. In addition, Transformation Server has the versatility and scalability to enable a range of increasingly popular applications including data warehousing, data distribution, ERP application integration, e-business and high availability.

Using Transformation Server, database changes on the IBM AS/400 are mirrored in real-time to the NT SQL Servers. While the company's proven and reliable vehicle tracking and accounting systems run on the AS/400, Microsoft Back Office applications can access data from an NT server as required. This methodology proved so successful that it has led to a host of new system solutions at MCL.

One such system is an automated dealer faxing system that merges IBM AS/400 data with Microsoft Word documents to eliminate the need for users to have to create faxes manually. "When we tried this application using ODBC, it proved slower and more difficult than creating the faxes by hand. Now, using DataMirror, we have completely automated the system. This saves us many hours every day," comments Gibson.

Because Transformation Server provides bi-directional replication, Gibson can take advantage of the best features of both the IBM AS/400 and NT. His stock flow management system, for example, makes use of historical sales, orders and stock data housed on the IBM AS/400. Transformation Server is used to trigger AS/400 calculations and then move the resulting data into an NT-based PowerBuilder application where it is combined with sales forecasting data to produce ordering plans and stock flow forecasts. This system helps to ensure that the right vehicle models in the right colors are available to customers throughout the UK.

MCL's Customer Assistance System is another application that takes advantage of Transformation Server's bi-directional functionality. This state-of-the-art application runs on an NT server and utilizes Computer Telephony Integration (CTI). When customers and dealers dial into MCL, their vehicle data and contact information automatically appear on the operator's computer screen. Updates made by operators to Windows NT databases are mirrored back to the AS/400.

MCL Continues to Roll Out New Applications

The plans for DataMirror Transformation Server continue to grow. MCL is now rolling out Echo, an extranet system which will enable dealers to sell automobiles more effectively. Designed to replace a VAX-based Viewdata/ISDN system, the new Echo extranet system will enable dealers to locate vehicles, access credit-checking and financial information on-line, and receive updates on the latest dealer promotions. Using the Echo extranet system, dealers will also be able to easily order parts and process warranty claims.

"Thanks to Transformation Server, we are comfortable with making Windows NT the server platform for all new departmental systems, yet we can continue to take advantage of the power, capabilities and reliability of the AS/400," concludes Gibson. "Transformation Server has more than lived up to our expectations."

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