

## Case Studies

### Fueling the Future

#### MECO of Atlanta pumps up its core ERP system through modernization

October 2009 | by Jim Utsler

Photo by Paul Couvrette



MECO IT Manager Albert Johnson (shown on company grounds with display pumps) says choosing integrated new tools that communicate with one another made ditching paper and green screens simple.

#### *Up Close*

**CUSTOMER:** MECO of Atlanta  
**HEADQUARTERS:** Doraville, Ga.  
**BUSINESS:** Petroleum equipment supplier  
**HARDWARE:** An IBM System i 520 and four System x servers  
**SOFTWARE:** Infor ERP System21, Surround Technologies' Accelerator, looksoftware's newlook and soarchitect, and LANSA's Visual LANSA  
**CHALLENGE:** Modernizing a green-screen-based ERP application  
**SOLUTION:** Using tools from Surround Technologies, looksoftware and LANSA to add a graphical interface and new functionality to its core application

Businesses large and small still often rely on paper-based and green screen-computing processes, despite the proliferation of paperless and graphical software tools. This can deprive them of opportunities to embed efficiencies into their overall business goals.

Several tools can help IT managers modernize existing applications and business processes

to create an integrated approach to supporting the business. And these solutions, if properly implemented, don't have to break the bank or require years of development and testing to deploy.

One such company that recently—and innovatively—discovered that is MECO of Atlanta. Rather than replacing an aging and somewhat modified ERP application with a new version, it simply decided to use what it had and, with the help of several handy tools, bring that application into the 21st century while improving its efficiency across the board.

### **Meeting Needs**

People who fill up their gas tanks in the American Southeast may have dealt with MECO of Atlanta without even knowing it. The company, now in business for more than 50 years and headquartered in Doraville, Ga., services and supports—and even assists in the building of—gas stations/convenience stores.

"We help in the construction of these businesses and then help them keep running," says Albert Johnson, IT manager with MECO of Atlanta. "So all of the piping, monitors, servers, point-of-sale systems, registers and even satellite connectivity falls under our purview. We even upgrade pump and other software to make sure our customers have the latest technologies and are in keeping with associated requirements."

MECO of Atlanta is an independently owned and operated subsidiary of MECO, from which it and other MECO companies purchase discounted products. MECO of Atlanta has service centers in the Georgia cities of Atlanta, Albany, Columbus, Macon and Savannah, and another in Jacksonville, Fla. To meet customer needs, MECO of Atlanta's data center consists of an IBM System i\* POWER5\* 520 running Infor ERP System21, which the company has been using for 16-plus years. It also has four standalone IBM System x\* boxes that handle such critical services as file serving and virus protection, and an i-integrated System x server that acts as a domain controller.

MECO of Atlanta is considering migrating much of its computing resources to an IBM BladeCenter\* solution. This would include not only its Windows\* servers and applications, but also its IBM i environment. Johnson, the company's sole IT employee, hopes to make this move in 2010, "the economy willing."

### **Done and Gone**

Before modernizing its application environment, MECO of Atlanta—and in particular, its Atlanta service center—had been using a rather arcane system to dispatch service technicians. Someone would take a customer call, write the details on a little pink phone-message slip and post it on a board. A technician would pick up the message, go to the site, complete the job and call back to the center for more work, repeating the process.

Although this information was entered into System21, it wasn't very transparent, and was

occasionally inaccurate. Job details, including whether they'd been completed, weren't available until the technicians returned to the office and turned in their paperwork, often the next day. This resulted in a gaping hole in the job process, with nobody quite sure what was happening.

"We knew we had open jobs and we knew when we had assigned jobs, because the open jobs were on the open-job side of the board and the assigned jobs were on the assigned-job side of the board, under the technicians' names," Johnson says. "But we really didn't know what was going on, until the paperwork was turned in, the relevant information entered into System21 and the invoices generated and sent out—when everything was done and gone."

Additionally, hand-written notes were sometimes hard to decipher, both for technicians and those handling the paperwork, who'd call with questions. This resulted in wasted time and errant information being entered into the system.

Compounding matters, not all of the service centers were using the same System21 functionality. Two of these branches were using the service module, but the others were entering parts ordering information elsewhere in the system. Because of this, back-end accounting personnel had to cull information from different sources to make the numbers—including those related to labor and parts—correspond.

## **That Simple**

Wanting to integrate its processes across the board, MECO of Atlanta decided to make the green-screen-based System21 more user friendly to encourage more widespread use. This was especially important for new hires, many of whom weren't comfortable with 5250 displays or using tab and function keys. It also wanted to streamline some of its formerly manual processes, which would help it avoid some of its time-consuming and errant data-entry issues.

To do so, the company needed a solution that would deliver a Web-like interface for System21 and take further advantage of the system's functionality. MECO of Atlanta thought it had found such a solution, but after a year and a half of working with it—with the vendor's help—it was making little noticeable headway.

The company jettisoned that product and began looking for another. Fortunately, it already had two-thirds of what it needed at hand, including Visual LANSA, which the company had used for an e-commerce application, and newlook from looksoftware, which had come bundled with the modernization tool that MECO of Atlanta had previously abandoned. What the company needed now was an application- and data-integration tool, which it found in Accelerator for Visual LANSA from Surround Technologies.

Given his experience with the earlier tool, Johnson was once bitten, twice shy when it came to using these tools to achieve his goals. Because of this, he talked with Surround about what he wanted and requested a proof of concept. Amazingly, Surround came back to him in three days with exactly that. "I told them, 'Yep, that's what I want.' It was that simple,"

Johnson says.

With all of the pieces in place, including looksoftware's soarchitect, the work began. Johnson coordinated with several Surround consultants to move beyond the proof-of-concept phase to tackle the entire project. He worked with soarchitect to create service oriented architecture scripts and Surround did the Visual LANSA programming. In a matter of weeks, the final solution was delivered.

With so many tools in use, this may sound like a complicated solution. But according to Johnson, this multitiered environment—which has been dubbed ECO (Employee Corner Online) System—is actually pretty simple. "I can use newlook to call Visual LANSA, which calls System21. And thanks to the navigation tools built into Accelerator, I can assign multiple green screens to single graphical screens. So when someone requests a screen, newlook goes to Visual LANSA and Visual LANSA goes to System21 and escalates the command and the requested screens back through newlook to the user," Johnson says. "Accelerator brings everything, including System21, Visual LANSA and newlook, together, creating, in particular, a framework for Visual LANSA so the System i can call Visual LANSA. That was the problem I was having with the other tool."

### **Click and Select**

Thanks to this implementation, Johnson didn't have to rewrite much of the back-end system. Hooks from the upper-level tools integrated with the existing system. More importantly, he didn't have to purchase an entirely new system or rewrite large portions of System21.

The company now has a Web-like home page that offers a menu of screens and subscreens. Users can click on Jobs Explorer, which brings up a page that lets them see an entire grid of jobs in one view. In the previous 5250 environment, these users were limited to viewing only 80 characters across and 24 lines down, which meant they would have to go from screen to screen to see job status—if they used System21 for this at all.

Similarly, users can call up the Job Details screen from the grids on the Jobs Explorer page. Details might include team cards with information regarding whether jobs have been scheduled, dispatched, assigned or completed—and by whom.

New functionality goes beyond even this. Technicians with laptops can now receive e-mails that contain work-detail spreadsheets when jobs have been assigned to them. And conversely, the technicians can e-mail job details back to their branches instead of coming in with paperwork. This and other measures have dramatically reduced paper use—by around 90 percent—and rekeying by an astounding 98 percent. (A future enhancement will eliminate the e-mails, with technicians simply filling out a form on their laptops and returning that to the back-end System21 application.)

The spreadsheets themselves are automatically populated with the relevant data as soon as it's entered into the system. They're then placed on the server and e-mailed to the



technicians, who save them on their laptops and, if needed, can print them on truck-based printers. This has reduced many of the inaccuracies involved in the earlier paper-based system.

MECO of Atlanta has also cleverly integrated Google Maps into its ECO System, providing technicians and sales reps with instant directions in the field.

Perhaps more important, though, is that everyone is working on the same system at the same time. This allows much greater business transparency than the company's ever had. "When you look at the team cards, you know where everyone's at and what they're working on. This system has all the pertinent information people need to have. And if you want to know more, you right-click on something and select it," Johnson says.

### **A Path Forward**

Most new applications have a standard interface, but for companies like MECO of Atlanta, which wanted to keep its existing core application without rewriting it, tools such as Surround's Accelerator, looksoftware's newlook and soarchitect, and Visual LANSA are invaluable.

These solutions not only allow for front- and back-end integration, but also let the company further innovate and dramatically improve business processes and workplace efficiencies—all in the space of six weeks. MECO of Atlanta now has a clearer view of "the path forward," as Johnson puts it, to go beyond what it has already accomplished.

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