

Holter Verwaltungs GesmbH

Holter Verwaltungs GesmbH “Understanding the Possibilities” with ASNA Visual RPG



Holter Verwaltungs GesmbH, based in Wels, Austria, is a wholesaler of plumbing fixtures and materials with more than 400 employees, annual revenues of €100 million, and 133 years of history. Having successfully navigated nearly a century and a half of technological and economic changes, Holter remains a family business, now in its fifth generation, with a strong commitment to its staff and a forward-looking management approach. Today, in order to maintain its position as a leading plumbing fixture wholesaler in Austria, the company is evolving its IT systems with ASNA products. With ASNA Visual RPG for Microsoft .NET (AVR) as its development platform, Holter maintains a modern corporate image, gains enhanced internal agility, and preserves and leverages valuable IT and human resources.

Situation: Moving beyond the green screen and onto a new platform

Markus Hiegelsberger, Holter's IT manager, heads a development staff of four programmers, each of whom has at least ten years of experience at Holter. These four programmers provide all support for the company's IT infrastructure, which includes an iSeries Model 520 with 3300 cpw, a Citrix Metaframe Server with 150 Igel thin clients, approximately 50 PC workstations and 50 laptops, and Tablet PCs carried by sales representatives. In-house programming staff developed Holter's own green-screen ERP system with RPG beginning in 1983, and they continued to develop green-screen applications for more than 20 years.

Eleven years ago, Holter was the first company in Austria to run a Web shop on the iSeries. The Web application, accomplished with RPG and CGI, continues to perform; 40 percent of orders are placed on the Web, and the site receives about 700,000 visits per month. With this example, Holter's management saw the benefits of a graphical user interface. Hiegelsberger notes, "We had one thousand new Web users, and it was not necessary to train them—so we started to develop programs with a browser

interface for our own staff." However, he says, "when the applications became more complex, it was very difficult to continue with RPG and CGI. So we decided to use object oriented programming."

At the same time as Holter's management saw the value of developing browser-faced programs for internal use, they also recognized the necessity of moving away from all green-screen development. Hiegelsberger says, "The company wanted to leave green-screen development behind—to avoid investment in green-screen technology for new projects." The company had tried eprogramming and the Web interface for customers, and it had worked well. They now wanted modern-looking, graphical applications for internal users. In many cases, Hiegelsberger says, "the application is 25 years old—that means the user interface was also 25 years old. The company has a great deal of experience with the application, but we wanted to have new features, including Windows screens and graphics."

But the desire to develop browser interface applications for internal users was just one aspect of Holter's need to find a strategic decision for development into the future. The prior technology environment—ILE-RPG and WDSC—would not provide appropriate solutions for the challenges of coming years. About two years ago, Holter began to look for a new development platform—one that would increase the power of Holter's Microsoft client and server platforms while providing for the continuing use of existing iSeries applications in the new schema.

The company wanted to evolve the programs they had developed in past years to provide higher-performing products and a new user experience. Hiegelsberger explains that the goal was "to service in-house users with up-to-date solutions, and our business partners with the data they need for offers to their customers." The sales people wanted a new, more powerful customer management system. In addition,

AT A GLANCE

Customer Profile

For 133 years, Holter Verwaltungs GesmbH, based in Wels, Austria, has been a wholesaler of plumbing fixtures and materials with more than 400 employees, and annual revenues of €100 million.

Situation

In order to maintain its position as a leading plumbing fixture wholesaler in Austria, Holter Verwaltungs GesmbH needed to evolve its IT systems.

Solution

Holter chooses ASNA Visual RPG for Microsoft .NET (AVR) as its development platform.

Benefits

- Holter maintains a modern corporate image.
- Gains enhanced internal agility.
- Preserves and leverages valuable IT and human resources.

Products

- ASNA Visual RPG for .NET
- DataGate
- IBM iSeries
- OS/400
- DB2/400
- Visual Basic .NET

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Holter's management wanted to project a more modern perception for the company to aid employee recruitment and retention. Hiegelsberger wanted to preserve existing developers' knowledge and company experience on a strategic platform that would help to solve the present and future programming challenges of the business.

The Business Challenge: Quick evolution while preserving resources

Executive management pressured Hiegelsberger to decide whether to continue with development on the iSeries or to move to SAP. Hiegelsberger opposed the SAP option for a number of reasons. First, it would require the complete redevelopment of applications and the presence of consultants for an extended period of time—hence it would be very expensive to install. It would also be expensive on an ongoing basis because of the additional hardware requirements to run SAP applications. Hiegelsberger cites the need for agility as another reason why he rejected the SAP option—Holter needs to be able to meet new market requirements quickly and efficiently, and Hiegelsberger felt that SAP would not be able to provide that agility. Finally, Hiegelsberger wanted to maintain the autonomy and control that the company would sacrifice with an SAP solution: "Our programs work how Holter wants them to work—not SAP."

The company was happy with its iSeries and the existing databases and business logic. It had well-functioning applications that were familiar to developers and users alike; the goal was to extend them into a Windows-like, graphical environment. Instead of switching to SAP, Hiegelsberger wanted to reuse existing code and to evolve programs onto the new platform. But he needed to show results quickly to convince executive management that an evolutionary approach was the right choice.

In keeping with Holter's long tradition of internal development, the company wanted to continue to rely on its own staff—made up, as Hiegelsberger points out, of "RPG programmers with long experience on the iSeries, but no experience with Microsoft." Thus, he explains, "The main question for us was, how can we teach our IT staff object oriented programming,

and how can we integrate our existing databases, business logic, and iSeries?"

Hiegelsberger did not seriously consider using Java. "When we started Web programming," he says, "Java was never heard of on the iSeries." The costs of a Java development effort—in hardware, training, and ROI—were difficult to predict, and Hiegelsberger feared that they would be excessive due to the cost of training his RPG programmers in Java. Hiring new developers was never considered—the value of the existing programmers' experience and familiarity with the company and the IT system was too great to sacrifice.

Hiegelsberger says he did not initially seriously consider development with .NET, because, he says, "it seemed to be a strange syntax, not like RPG." While evaluating Visual Basic and C#, he looked again at AVR, became interested, contacted an ASNA partner to learn more, and, as he puts it, began to "understand the possibilities."

Solution: Selection of ASNA and AVR

"ASNA products offered the advantage of saving the human resources of our developers as well as the investments that we have made in the iSeries over the years to reach the next generation of business solutions," Hiegelsberger says. An important factor in his selection of ASNA products and AVR in particular was the fact that existing programmers could be trained quickly to undertake the development. "We selected ASNA products," he explains, "because the move to .NET is done quickly, and the products we build meet industrial standards and are of high quality. The main focus is to improve the knowledge of our staff to work on a modern and strategic platform."

Hiegelsberger outlines the reasons for choosing ASNA and AVR as follows:

- Developers' existing RPG know-how would be enhanced for use on a modern platform.
- AVR and ASNA DataGate software would provide fast and reliable access to Holter's iSeries database.
- AVR would provide a single development platform for all types of projects that might arise in the future.



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- ASNA products would allow Holter to move to .NET from a well-known base, using well-known tools.

Hiegelsberger contacted a local software partner for support, and Holter began development with AVR and DataGate in March 2006.

The Development Process: The right training for an efficient start

For support and training, Hiegelsberger went to Christian Neissl of NiceWare IT, a local software partner and ASNA qualified trainer. Neissl provided three training sessions for a total of five days of training in AVR. According to Neissl, the developers were initially concerned that they would have to relearn everything they knew—but after the first day of training, they found that they could use the same commands as with RPG.

At the end of the training, each of the four programmers was assigned a program. The first was the sales customer management system. Another was a program for route planning for sales representatives, who carry Tablet PCs equipped with a GPS location finder and the ability to communicate with the company. The third program provides overviews of product information and prices for management, and the fourth was an information system containing articles about Holter products and services.

Neissl notes that after having provided the AVR training, he made himself available to help solve problems or answer any questions that might arise during the development effort—but there were none. After three weeks of no contact from Holter, he got in touch with Hiegelsberger to check on their progress and learned “this program is doing this and this program is doing that—they were surprised at how well it was going and the level of quality” that they were able to achieve so rapidly.

Hiegelsberger’s programmers had attended their five days of AVR training in March 2006. Within five days the route planning program was complete, and within five more days both the product information/price system and the article information system were also complete. By the end of June, the customer management system was finished.

Benefits: Incremental significant improvements

For Hiegelsberger, the greatest benefit of development with AVR was that “not everything was new for the developer.” Since existing programming staff could build on their own skill set, the company could avoid bringing in new staff and could maintain their valued existing human resources. Since programming staff did not need to start from scratch, they became productive quickly and were motivated to undertake additional applications in AVR.

Hiegelsberger says, “Now we are able to do .NET projects with the same staff and in the same way as we did in the green-screen world. Productivity is on the same level. We expect to be even more efficient in the future because we can reuse the new programs and classes we are developing now.”

On the user side, Hiegelsberger points to the architecture of the solution: that iSeries data, when presented in a modern Windows application, with graphics and Web resources, is easier to use, so users are better satisfied and more productive. Users benefit from greater ease of access to data and clearer presentation of complex information.

As an example, Hiegelsberger notes that in the past, Holter’s salesmen were not comfortable with using their computers, so they tended to work on paper. Now that a GUI interface is available, they are using the available technology, and transactions are faster and more efficient. Excel integration helps users to exchange data very quickly, and it saves substantial development work as well. The standardization of field value checking using Help Provider and Tool Tips makes possible dialogs with fewer controls and higher functionality. Overall, Hiegelsberger says, “users are very happy because they can do their work much easier than they could with green-screen applications.”

“Developing applications for Windows is not a big revolution, it is an evolution by small steps,” Hiegelsberger says. “For example, now when we merge pictures with our article files, we can do this with drag and drop, we do not have to enter the path, and we avoid mistakes in entering the

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path. When we look at sales, we can now see charts. We can integrate Excel. And so forth."

Agility, scalability, ease of integration, increased productivity, and lowered costs are among the business values Holter has gained from replatforming with ASNA products, according to Hiegelsberger. "This is the way for the future," he says. "ASNA is not only the solution for one project—for Holter it is the solution for our complete further development."

About ASNA

Established in 1982, San Antonio-based ASNA develops and markets unique software products that evolve IBM AS/400 and iSeries/i5 systems. Aligned with Microsoft's .NET initiative, ASNA is the only company to offer a thoroughly conceived, standards-based extension and migration path that solves its customers' business challenges. For more information about ASNA: <http://www.asna.com/>.

Most recently, ASNA joined Microsoft in founding the Midrange Alliance Program, a strategic initiative to help enterprises worldwide reduce the risks and high cost of maintaining, extending and migrating aging IBM midrange systems. The alliance establishes the technical foundation for these enterprises to efficiently move to .NET and includes ASNA products as cornerstone enabling technologies. For more on the Midrange Alliance Program: <http://www.microsoft.com/midrange/>.