Pacific Seafood saves thousands by moving to an electronic document-distribution system

Simple Savings

BY JIM UTSLER

I've been covering IBM i since it was known as the AS/400* platform. (Yeah, I know, I'm dating myself.) And the one thing that continues to come up when customers tell me about the system is its simplicity.

The same holds for much of the software that runs with IBM i, including not only software developed by IBM, but also that from third-party vendors. As Pacific Seafood Group recently discovered, a robust application doesn't have to be complex and hard to understand to be effective. To the contrary, it simply has to work.

Such is the case with DRV Technologies' SpoolFlex, which Pacific Seafood uses to electronically disseminate business documents to internal and external customers. Thanks to this product's ease of use, the company saves thousands of dollars a year in paper, labor and printer supplies, says Dave Pracz, System i* administrator with Pacific Seafood.

More Than Capable

The Clackamas, Ore.-based Pacific Seafood was established as a single storefront in 1941 by Frank M. Dulcich and his son Dominic. The company has, of course, grown since that humble beginning (although that storefront is still operational, Pracz says), including when it created an import department in 1977 and added a processing plant in 1983.

Now, the company has a global reach, processing products from Alaska to Mexico at several plants, using conveniently located distribution centers to deliver to restaurants, retailers and distributors across the country, and exporting products to Asia, Europe and the Middle East (from which it also imports products). Despite its name, Pacific Seafood—which the Dulciches still own and operate with Dominic's son Frank Dominic Dulcich acting as president and CEO—also processes beef and poultry.

The company uses two iSeries* 810s to support its operations, with one as a production machine and the other as an off-site, real-time mirrored backup. Pracz says, "I don't think there's a better system on the planet, and it's more than capable of handling our business."

The core mission-critical application is an ERP solution heavily modified over the years to suit Pacific Seafood's business model. As the company's sole IBM i administrator, Pracz is responsible for maintaining the 810s and the applications that run on them. He's also in charge of finding new IBM i-based solutions to help the company improve business processes and save money.

One such solution is DRV's SpoolFlex. Prior to deploying this application, which runs on the IBM i and electronically distributes spool files, the company had been doing business as so many others do, including manually distributing internal reports and printing and faxing or snail-mailing business-related documents, such as invoices and purchase orders, to external business partners.

As Pracz explains, "Each plant runs its own day-end processing every night and, in the past, typically generated reams of paper, either on standard laser paper or even generic green-bar paper. Somebody would then come in the next morning, sift through all of this, separate the reports and then hand deliver them to whomever needed them. This took a lot of time and patience, and it was expensive, because of the huge amount of paper and printer supplies involved."

Additionally, faxing documents was sometimes an issue. Although Pacific Seafood Group had an automated faxing solution, it involved a dedicated PC-based server. This created a level of maintenance complexity, including server administration and software support, the company wanted to avoid. It also meant the company had to retain land lines to service the fax server, which was yet another expense.

An Automated Routine

To address these and other issues, Pracz sought a solution that would help the company reduce print-based reports and its reliance on the fax server. Not wanting to jump into things too quickly, however, he investigated several options, only to discover, as he puts it, that "they were lacking in some areas, and one of them was Windows* based, which meant we would have to have another standalone server. That would have defeated part of our purpose." Based on a recommendation by a long-standing IT business partner, Pacific Software, he took a second look at SpoolFlex and began testing it in March 2008.

Pracz began this testing with internal reports, realizing that if something didn't work quite right, users could simply find the report and print it as they had in the past. As things turned out, the software simply worked, with little or no hiccups. Satisfied SpoolFlex would meet the company's requirements, Pracz decided to install it on the production 810 and roll it out on a larger scale, to include externally distributed mission-critical documents.

Invoices made up the first of these latter classes of documents. To make sure he could lay them out correctly, he enlisted DRV's assistance to design that form. "I scanned a sample invoice for them, and they designed the whole form, sent it back to me, and after a couple of tweaks on my end, it looked like the real deal," Pracz recalls. "After that, I just began designing the other forms by myself."

Forms such as invoices and purchase orders are created as overlays, with the appropriate data being merged with

the predesigned form. (In the past, they were output to preprinted forms.) The results, typically in PDF format, look as though they've been output on a laser printer, with the recipient none the wiser. "As far as everyone's concerned, we're doing things the way we always have," Pracz says. This includes internal users, who simply submit, for example, invoices as they always have, with the documents going into a spool file.

SpoolFlex then reads the header containing the appropriate distribution information, whether it's an e-mail address, fax number or physical mailing address. When the SpoolFlex sentry finds files in the spool queue, which Pacific Seafood has set to check every three to five minutes, it strips that header information and routes the documents accordingly.

Notably, many files go out as e-mails, including faxes. If the document is meant to be distributed as an e-mail, it's simply sent to the recipient's address. If it needs to be faxed, it's e-mailed to EasyLink, a third-party faxing company, which then sends the messages to recipients as faxes. "The

SpoolFlex also lets Pracz easily archive spool files. He can, for example, configure the tool to move files to one queue once they've been processed in another queue. The files can then be uploaded to a network server and deleted on the 810, freeing up space on that machine and letting the company keep these older files for future reference. "The volume of spool files we were generating just continued to grow, and unless you keep on top of it, it can get out of control," Pracz says. "Now, it's just another automated routine."

Paying for Itself

Although SpoolFlex has a green-screen interface, Pracz insists that the software is easy to master, with form creation taking only an hour or two to complete. "And once it's done, that's it. There's no need to adjust it unless there's some sort of dramatic change to the document. But I haven't had that happen yet," he says.

Pracz is also quick to note that DRV is very responsive to his requests and quick to address problems. He notes an

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total turnaround time from the time the e-mails leave the 810 to the time the fax goes out is less than a minute," Pracz says. If the document is being sent to a network folder, it goes out as a PDF using the IBM i IFS.

To ensure documents are indeed being distributed as intended, DRV offers an add-on audit-trail feature that works with SpoolFlex. As one might expect, it logs everything the application processes, whether it's a simple converted spool file for a user or a fax or e-mailed document for an external recipient. The audit trail logs the date and time the spool file was sent, along with the delivery method, destination and name of the converted document or attachment.

Converted spool files can be viewed in their new format from the audit trail and be resent if necessary. "All these functions have been extremely valuable for us on numerous occasions," Pracz says. "For example, if a recipient believes that a spool file that was e-mailed as an attachment wasn't received, I can confirm the date and time the document was sent and its destination. The sentry can be configured to send an alert e-mail if it ever encounters a failure. Since we're now relying significantly more on the successful distribution of our invoices and purchase orders, it's important to know as soon as an issue occurs."

example when he suggested that a confirmation screen pop up when an address was being deleted from the system to avoid inadvertent deletions. "It wasn't but a couple weeks later that a new version came out and that feature was included in it," Pracz recalls, adding that updates are easy to install. "You just FTP it up to the IBM i, and SpoolFlex takes it from there," he says. "The whole process can be finished in minutes. It's very, very simple."

More important, however, has been the response from end users. "When we first implemented it for the reports, it was a huge hit on a number of levels," Pracz says. "We saved people hours when it came to bursting and distributing all of these reports. And then there were the cost savings related to paper. We're saving quite a bit just on that, and that doesn't include the preprinted forms we were also using. SpoolFlex has already paid for itself many times over." And with SpoolFlex, Pacific Seafood continues its march toward more sustainable business practices. ⓘ

Jim Utsler, IBM Systems Magazine *senior writer, has been covering technology for more than a decade. Jim can be reached at jutsler@ msptechmedia.com.*