LEGISLATIVE SERVICE CENTER & CONNX CASE STUDY

Legislative Service Center maintains and supports the legislative computing system for the Washington State Legislature. Its 41-person staff provides services to between 700 and 800 users during session and between 500 and 600 users throughout the rest of the year. Services include computer training, computer support and repair, applications support, technical support, and coordination of information systems planning.

Industry
Government

HQ
Olympia, WA

Solutions
DB Adaptors

Highlights

♦ Flexible system to get information into and reports out of organizations databases.

Capitalizing on Technology Investments

Government faces constant change— from the composition of governmental bodies to newly enacted legislation. And the technology available to support legislative activities changes rapidly, too. For example, the Legislative Service Center (LSC), founded in 1969 to maintain the computing system for the Washington State Legislature, has already replaced its technology environment once so it can provide the greater functionality users expect.

"When we needed a more flexible system to get information into and reports out of our database, we moved from our original IBM mainframe environ-

ment to a VAX-based platform from Digital Equipment Corporation," recalls Terry Plant, Applications Support Manager at LSC. "The IBM ran lawmaking applications developed in house, while the VAX ran a lawmaking application from Public Systems Associates." But changes, such as the swift arrival of faster desktops and Windows, the availability of the World Wide Web, and users' expectations that they should have the same capabilities on their systems at work as they had on their PCs at home, quickly threatened to antiquate LSC's new solution. "We proposed to the legislature that we not wait until the current environment becomes so obsolete that we have to re-

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- Terry Plant | Applications Support Manager at LSC

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About CONNX

CONNX Solutions is a leader in data access, migration, integration, virtualization, and replication. Their solutions enable quick, secure, and scalable SQL access to legacy, non-relational, relational, and cloud data wherever it resides, however it is structured, without any change to your core systems. CONNX is quick and easy to set up and use and offers easy standards-based tools that are accessible, flexible, and scalable.

Since 2001, CONNX solutions have been installed in more than 3,200 organizations worldwide and across a range of industries including government, manufacturing, education, technology, human resources, financial services, and telecommunications. CONNX's solutions unleash the power and value of information, providing organizations the ability to make confident, evidence-based business decisions.

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-place it," says Plant. "Instead, we recommended that the Legislature continually evolve the environment and stay current."

The strategy made sense. However, the decision to preserve their existing environment, which included two file systems, posed challenges of its own. "We had lawmaking data in RMS flat files and business application data in Rdb, all running on the VAX," explains Rick Schnabel, Computer Analyst Programmer at LSC. The organization needed a bridge to their legacy data so the data could be kept up-to-date as IT used a new relational database and built new applications with the expanded functionality and ease-of-use their users would constantly require. In addition, IT wanted to be able to generate better reports more easily and take advantage of new development tools.

"Even though we knew our choice would benefit end users, our primary concern was to acquire an enabling technology that would provide the glue between our old and new systems," says Plant. LSC decided to evaluate two connectivity solutions, one of which was CONNX, an ODBC-level 2 compliant driver developed by CONNX to streamline access to data in legacy systems. Schnabel had learned about the product in 1993 when, as a programmer for the Washington Senate, he was looking for a reporting tool.

The organization compared the capabilities, speed, and price of the two products. "CONNX gave us the ability to not only read, but also to update and delete," Schnabel notes. "The competing product only provided read capabilities." In addition, according to him, "CONNX was much faster when we benchmarked both products using our RMS files. And the price was about one-eighth the cost of the other option." Also, CONNX stream-lined the connection between the VAX and reengineered components. "When I considered CONNX in 1993 I was really impressed with it," Schnabel says, "and back then I was only concerned with using it for a fraction of what we use it for today."

End users, to whom CONNX is transparent, appreciate the graphical user interface they now have from the reengineered application. More importantly from Schnabel and Plant's perspective, CONNX meets IT's objectives for an enabling technology that makes it possible to link the organization's old and new systems. As a result of having such a bridge, LSC has been able to significantly improve report generation from legacy data and experience easier application development.

"CONNX saves us a tremendous number of hours in drafting reports," says Schnabel. "Reports that took weeks in C, then hours in 4GL, now get completed in an hour. That's an order of magnitude difference." Plant agrees, adding, "The big advantage of CONNX is that it gives us the ability to use

newer reporting tools that make us more productive. Greater productivity translates into time and money savings." CONNX also aids IT in its application development tasks. "We would not be able to do what we are doing without CONNX," Schnabel emphasizes. "CONNX has enabled us to get at old data with new tools, to provide new interfaces, and to develop applications that can run on PCs with functionality we did not have before, such as integration to e-mail."

In addition, CONNX is helping LSC eliminate the duplication of information, as well as the complexities of updating it. For example, information about members of the legislature appears in the lawmaking system, as well as in business applications. LSC wanted to create a single application to maintain all the demographic data in one location and keep updates in synch. To achieve this goal, Schnabel wrote software called CORE Transaction Manager, which updates the data, with CONNX providing access to the RMS data on the VAX. "CONNX is a great solution, whether you want to keep RMS files or migrate," he says.

Despite the product's easy installation and ease of use, the responsiveness of CONNX proved critical when LSC ran into a problem early in their implementation. "When we first purchased CONNX, it didn't fully support all the third party tools we wanted to use," explains Schnabel. "CONNX pinpointed the problem. We thought they would simply deal with it in the next product release, but instead, within two weeks they had cut a new version of the product and FTPed it to us. This kind of service is almost unheard of and it's one of the things that has impressed us the most."

"CONNX helps us fulfill our strategy of evolving our system," says Plant. "With it, we can do the best we can with the system we have, while evolving it in stages. The alternative would be to replace all of it at once, like we had to do when we moved to our current environment."