
Sentences™ Case Study

Prime Selection's eCruit

One of the most serious issues with the computer automation of business processes is the way that the technologies, and the overheads of implementing it, get in the way of creative ideas. Take Chris Morrow, the MD of Prime Selection (a leading recruitment and consultancy business specialising in the IT Sector) and his idea. He wants to provide his customers with a web-based tool that will help them manage staff acquisition, including, particularly, temporary and contract staff. Moreover, he wants to licence this software to his clients for nothing - for as long as Prime Selection remains the "preferred supplier" of staff to the users of his software.

With Chris's experience, the basic requirements aren't hard to formulate. All of his clients face the same basic challenges, mainly to do with managing the process of recruitment: coordinating activities in multiple departments and across multiple recruitment agencies. However once recruitment takes place further challenges arise: managing who is working where and (with contractors and temps) answering questions such as: 'Who is up for renewal?', 'Who has been here longer than company policy permits?'. For over a year Chris struggles to bring his idea to fruition. Despite speaking to countless web developers and suppliers of 'B2B Engines' (business to business eCommerce software) he comes up against two problems: giving the software away free will not be easy due to the cost associated with conventional Internet development, and also his clients are reluctant to install proprietary software to run the application. "This really was a business problem in search of a solution" says Chris.

Then he comes across Lazysoft, developers of Sentences, the first associative database - that is, a database based on the Associative Model of Data™ developed by Simon Williams, Lazysoft's Chief Executive Officer. The Systems Development Life Cycle used by Lazysoft is certainly like nothing he's ever encountered, although it has similarities with a technique called JAD (Joint Application

Development) formulated by IBM many years ago in order to develop very high-quality software in the shortest time possible. Lazysoft, as befits its name, is lazy enough not to want to spend unnecessary time on a problem and bright enough to realise that the best way to achieve this is to take the quickest route to the solution and get it right first time.

The essence of JAD is to extract requirements from the business manager with authority to determine the process actually in use, quickly and in one meeting, capturing the requirements in a model that is stored in a computer. Ideally, the system is then automatically generated from the model. There is a bit more to JAD than this but let's see how the modern equivalent, enabled by better and cheaper technology and espoused by Lazysoft, works.

Day One:

At Lazysoft's HQ in Bucks, Chris Morrow and Benjamin Thorpe, Head of Business Solutions at Lazysoft, sit down for a discussion of what the systems needs to do. Ben has the Sentences development environment loaded onto his PC and displays it on a data projector, while Chris starts to tell him about his requirements.

As the discussion unfolds the Sentences environment is used to develop a schema of the database. At any point in the discussion they can look at the input screens that are automatically generated. As with any user, Chris starts to think of the things he would really like now that he is confronted with the real, working, data-entry screens for his system.

These requirements are added there and then, creating a comprehensive Recruitment Supplier Management System. By 15:00 on this first day the system is there and ready to use in anger. Chris leaves Lazy with a URL enabling him to log into the system from anywhere that has an Internet connection.

Day Two:

Er...well.... there isn't really a formal Day two... The system is ready as soon as the schema is created because the screens (called Dataforms in Sentences) are automatically generated at run-time. The whole environment is written in Java so it is ready to deploy across the Internet or intranet, as appropriate.

In the weeks following Day One, Chris shows the system to colleagues and clients. The system is refined and some terminology changes but each change takes seconds to do. However, a second formal session, lasting only a couple of hours, is held to add functionality for extending contracts – a significant enhancement.

It is apparent that any changes to the business process can be reflected in the system almost immediately, and that customers can tailor the system to take account of their jargon and business process, in a matter of hours. The implementation issues have now moved over to Prime Selection's clients, who have received news of the system well and are eager to get onto the rollout program. The two choices they have are:

- To install the system "in house", which means investing in the requisite infrastructure and administering the application; or
- To use the ASP (Application Service Provider) option, which is available from GB Direct. The ASP model is for a service provider to host the computer environment required for the Sentences system, and manage it as a service, for which Prime Selection's customer pays a small subscription.

The first, in-house, option maximises the customer's control over the system. On the other hand, the second option lets the customer realise the anticipated benefits from the new system with little or no capital investment – the only downside is that ASP is a new model for software acquisition (although quite similar to the "computer bureau" model of many years ago). The ASP option seems ideal for Chris's vision of providing a low-cost, high-value service.

In conclusion, Chris feels that Sentences has removed the three great impediments to conventional Internet development:

- "Firstly, it's time consuming to get through the analysis cycle, only to have to do it all again a

month later when the programmers come back to you, and the business need has changed. With Sentences a one day workshop will lay the foundation of a complete, yet flexible, system."

- "Then, once written, the system needs to be easily deployable. With Sentences all you need is a standard web server and you're up and running, and almost everyone has a browser these days."
- "Finally, the overhead of Internet system development is great and rising. We finally have some software that addresses the chronic shortage of Internet-savvy IT expertise."

The bottom line according to Chris is that "Sentences has brought down the cost of developing secure Internet software to the point where I can afford to give eCruit away. This makes my customers' work easier and therefore helps keep Prime Selection on their preferred supplier lists."
