National Envelope: Part of the Fold

by Scott Steinacher

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU WONDERED, HOWever briefly, what it would be like to be in a different iSeries shop? What systems do they have? What tools do they use? Are their problems anything like ours? This article begins a series that aims to answer those questions. Each installment of iSeries@Work will profile a different enterprise that uses the iSeries, the software it runs, and the main challenges its IT department faces. Unlike a case study, this won't be a story about a problem solved, but rather a profile of what it's like in the trenches at another company that relies on the iSeries to get the job done.

Although you may not have heard of National Envelope Corporation, you probably use its products every day. The company produces more than 900 million envelopes each week at 18 factories located throughout the United States. Founded by William Ungar in 1952, it has grown from a single location with three machines into the largest privately held envelope manufacturer in the country.

National Envelope produces envelopes in virtually every shape and size, from diminutive coin envelopes for banks to large X-ray envelopes for hospitals and medical practices. Many of its products are custom made to carry advertisements, bills, brochures, checks, statements, and other pieces of direct mail.

National Envelope Corporation

Business: Envelope manufacturer
Headquarters: Long Island City, NY
Public or Private: Private
Annual Revenue: $650 million
IT Staff Size: 20
iSeries systems: Four model 820s

"On the surface, an envelope might not seem very complex," comments Mark Mogul, the company's vice president of information technology. "But there are actually many specifications that we need to track, including those for colors, sizes, windows, paper grades, flaps, tints, and adhesives. If you study the variety of envelopes that reach your mailbox on a typical day, you'll have a much greater appreciation for what it takes to make them."

Reliability Is the Key

National Envelope runs its mission-critical applications on two iSeries model 820s. It also uses MIMIX, Lakeview Technology's high-availability solution, to replicate data in realtime to two additional 820 servers. All servers are located on site, but the company is considering moving its backup machines to an off-site hosting facility.

"Our factories run around the clock," notes Mogul. "If our system fails, we can't take orders, schedule production, or ship product. Reliability has always been a hallmark of IBM's midrange platform, and that has been our experience since the early days of the System/38."

"We have an open mind when it comes to technology," adds Mogul. "In fact, we strive to be platform agnostic; otherwise, we couldn't effectively evaluate what's on the market. Our experience with other servers, however, has kept us firmly committed to the iSeries for mission-critical computing. It takes only one worm or virus to wipe out a PC server, and that's not an acceptable risk for many applications."

"IBM has always offered a solid growth path to midrange customers, and that's another reason we've remained on the platform," Mogul continues. "National has grown dramatically over the years through acquisitions, and the iSeries kept up with our need for additional processing power."

A Versatile Software Bundle

To manage its manufacturing, inventory, order distribution, and accounting processes, National Envelope uses PeopleSoft World, an enterprise resource planning (ERP) application. In addition, the company maintains several legacy applications that perform a variety of tasks. Written in every flavor of RPG, the applications will eventually be converted to World.

"We're very interested in PeopleSoft's plans for World," Mogul states. "Personally, I'd like to see more Webfacing applications that leverage the iSeries' inherent stability and performance."

For its output management requirements, National Envelope relies on the Create!form family of products from Bottomline Technologies. Using the company's electronic forms software, National Envelope prints critical business documents on laser printers directly from its PeopleSoft World modules. Previously, National Envelope had used bulky line printers and costly, multipart forms to produce checks, invoices, purchase orders, statements, acknowledgements, packing slips, bills of lading, and customs documents. To print box and carton labels, National Envelope uses Barcode400 from T.L. Ashford and thermal printers from Zebra Technologies.

"Many people underestimate the crucial role that documents play in the day-to-day operations of a business," declares Mogul. "If we couldn't print packing slips, for example, our warehouses couldn't ship product. For that reason, we print directly from our iSeries. We had considered using Windows-based print servers but couldn't afford the downtime required for service pack upgrades."

For its faxing needs, National Envelope uses Faxcom for AS/400 from Wayside Marketing, Inc. (formerly ESD Computer Services). The product is integrated with both World and Create!form. To distribute documents via e-mail, the company uses Create!email, a Windows 2000 Server-based product from Bottomline Technologies. Content for e-mail messages originates on the iSeries and is sent to an e-mail server via remote output queues.

VENDOR CONTACTS

Bottomline Technologies
createform.com

Lakeview Technology Corporation
lakeviewtech.com

LANSA
lansa.com

PeopleSoft, Inc.
peoplesoft.com

T.L.Ashford
tlashford.com

Wayside Marketing, Inc.
waysidemarketing.com

Zebra Technologies International LLC
zebra.com

National Envelope hosts its homegrown e-commerce application, dubbed @National, on one of its model 820s. Tightly integrated with World, the application lets customers input orders, view inventory, maintain account data, print invoices and statements, and look up product specifications in realtime via a Web browser. The company built @National with two products from LANSA: Commerce Edition and LANSA for the Web. The former is a Web-based, business-to-business solution designed to integrate with back-end ERP systems, and the latter is a Web development platform.

"Using the iSeries for our e-commerce application just made sense," notes Mogul. "That's where our data resides, and the operating system is impervious to viruses and worms. I do wish more third-party tools like WebTrends were available for the iSeries, though. Unfortunately, there is no widely embraced standard for developing Web apps on the platform, so there are not many third-party Web tools available for it. IBM is doing well with its WebSphere development road map, but still I wish there were more third-party support."

A Varied IT Department

National Envelope's IT department includes three development managers, several systems analysts, an implementation project team, a small help desk, and a network/operations group. The development managers evaluate new technologies, manage budgets, oversee the systems analysts, and support the implementation team. The systems analysts are responsible for making business processes more efficient through the application of technology. At National, the bulk of this work is done in a 5250 environment using SEU, SDA, and RPG III and IV. Two analysts are also conversant in LANSA for the Web and use the product to maintain the company's e-commerce site. In addition, one analyst uses Visual Basic to develop client/server applications that access data on the iSeries. (National Envelope does expect to develop more applications for the Web and is considering several development environments, including WebSphere Development Studio, LANSA for the Web, and Microsoft.NET.) The implementation team is tasked with converting legacy applications to World, while the help desk provides technical support to National's user community. Finally, the network/operations group is responsible for evaluating, purchasing, and maintaining all servers, personal computers, controllers, routers, firewalls, and other IT-related hardware.

"The iSeries helped us protect our investment in application development as we grew into a large organization," concludes Mogul. "And during that time, we never had to endure the agony of disruptive upgrade cycles. I don't know what challenges the future holds for us, but I know the iSeries will help us meet them as effectively as possible." ■

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