

Visual Intercept Pays Big Dividends For AnnuityNet

It's a software development nightmare or an intriguing challenge, depending on how you look at it: tracking up to 800 status changes daily and managing these changes, which occur across numerous product lines developed on one common technology platform, so that fixing one bug doesn't adversely affect the rest of the platform. This is exactly the situation that developers at Herndon, Va.-based AnnuityNet faced when business increased dramatically a couple of years ago. Thanks to Elsinore Technologies' Visual Intercept enterprise issue management software, developing a reliable, efficient and user-friendly solution wasn't nearly as taxing as it could have been.

Company background

AnnuityNet, Inc., was founded in 1997 as a B2C web site where consumers could purchase annuities online. While this business model wasn't as successful as the company had anticipated, interest from within the annuities industry for the platform was growing, and, in 2000, AnnuityNet shifted its focus from selling annuities to deploying its technology as an industry standard engine for powering annuities sales and services operations. Now, the company is exclusively an Applications Services Provider (ASP) offering technology services to the annuity industry. Current clients include such well-known financial services companies as Merrill Lynch, Fidelity, GE, Charles Schwab, Legg Mason and Lincoln Life. AnnuityNet offers customers a private labeled version of its site, or links their distribution channels directly to the company's annuity technology engine. AnnuityNet's unified platform currently supports more than 70 annuity products, with 100 products slated to go online by the end of 2002.

An application with issues—lots of them

The move to the B2B environment has been, according to Will Vaughn, director of Technology Services at AnnuityNet, "phenomenally successful," and the company's challenge was less to attract new customers than to keep track of the vast



AT A GLANCE

- Develops Internet-based technology for annuity sales and servicing
- 80 employees
- Based in Herndon, VA
- Platform currently processes nearly \$2 billion per month in annuity transactions
- Uses Visual Intercept to track up to 800 status changes each day

quantity of data inherent in the new business model. With so many different customers, variety of implementations, range of products and the launching and ongoing maintenance for each, tracking and managing programming data and changes to that data became AnnuityNet's number one IT problem. AnnuityNet discovered it was a problem that was impossible to overcome manually. "Since our product is built on a single engine, any change that we make for one client can potentially affect the entire site," said Vaughn. "Because of the sheer volume of changes that we make every day, we need a tool that allows us to proactively manage the site and to quickly see the results that one change will have on the entire site."

After attempting to manage changes using Microsoft Excel® data sheets and Microsoft Outlook®, AnnuityNet knew they needed a solution designed specifically for incident tracking that would also integrate with Visual Source Safe, their primary development tool.

A full-service solution

After reviewing several solutions, they chose Elsinore Technologies' Visual Intercept. "Visual Intercept was by far the most flexible and robust system we reviewed," said Williams, citing the software's project-oriented approach to issue management, scalability and ease with which the program can be customized as key attributes.



"VISUAL INTERCEPT PLAYS AN INTEGRAL ROLE NOT JUST IN HELPING US TRACK BUGS DURING SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT BUT ALSO IN MANAGING OUR DEPLOYMENT CYCLES, WORK ORDERS, CHANGE REQUESTS, VERSION CONTROL SOFTWARE AND OTHER BUSINESS PROCESSES."

--LINC WILLIAMS, DIRECTOR OF QUALITY SERVICES

"The fact that Visual Intercept is a true enterprise issue management solution, rather than just a bug tracking tool for software development, is important," Williams said. "An 'incident' is often not a defect in the code: the problem is often with the business process the customer is trying to capture."

Since implementing Visual Intercept in March of 2000, AnnuityNet's incident throughput has gone up tremendously. Meanwhile, Visual Intercept has easily kept pace with incident management tasks while drastically reducing the number of issues that slip through the cracks due to improper issue handling, or failure to handle them.

And, because Visual Intercept is SQL server-based— a platform that everyone knows—interfacing with the raw data and storing procedures used to build and update AnnuityNet's technology engine is much easier, according to Williams.

Proving its worth

AnnuityNet depends on Visual Intercept not only as a means of improving its software development process, but also as a way of demonstrating the platform's reliability to potential customers who perform due diligence.

"In the financial services industry, there is a considerable amount of scrutiny placed on any service provider that will be handling end user data," explained Vaughn. "Not only must the service provided

be 100% solid, but the processes and procedures surrounding how the service is provided and maintained must also be bulletproof.”

Visual Intercept plays a key role in due diligence, not just for quality assurance and development, but also for disaster recovery, which is absolutely crucial in the financial services industry. “If a customer’s production facility burned to the ground, we could relatively easily rebuild everything we’ve done simply by looking at the Visual Intercept incidents,” said Williams. “Every time we do code modification, those changes and the instructions for deploying them are captured so we have on-the-fly updated build manuals of all the software we’ve ever done in our database.”

Easy to customize

Customers can be assured of the security of their data. Developers have severely limited access to code once they have completed it and turned it over to quality control. In fact, developers can no longer move code once they have written it: that function is performed by a manager using a “push” tool that Williams developed as a custom extension to Visual Intercept. The push tool is a VBA plug-in to Visual Intercept that enables AnnuityNet to “push” source code from their VSS database and

BENEFITS

- Enables rapid and efficient issue management
- Dramatically decreases the number of issues that slip through the cracks
- Provides real time access to information, allowing faster, more informed decision making
- Helps support best practices that enable rapid modification of business model
- Microsoft-centric solution supports VSS integration
- Scalability allowed seamless extension of solution from 5 to 32 developers in two years
- Easy to make changes and manipulate data within Visual Intercept’s project-structured approach
- Easy to customize to meet unique application needs

migrate it into their different test environments using the Visual Intercept interface. “The push tool allows us to migrate the latest version of code from environment to environment, which ensures that we are working on the correct version of the code at any given time and in any given environment, and it saves us a huge amount of time over manual version control,” Williams said.

Williams also developed QA history tables to reflect the current status of each incident and issue. Crystal Reports, which is bundled with Visual Intercept, uses these tables to generate project status reports that give managers a real-time gauge of each project, allowing them to make more rapid and informed decisions.

Vaughn and Williams also modified Visual Intercept’s e-mail output to implement a company-wide business rule that forwards various Visual Intercept issues to different in-boxes so that issues can be handled quickly and efficiently.

“The ability to customize Visual Intercept’s base rules is one of the things that we value most about this software,” said Williams.

Extending Visual Intercept to external stakeholders

Currently, change control requests are handled manually, and, as a result, they consume a lot of time. “It should only take 10-15 seconds for us to find out why a change control wasn’t done, rather than one day of manual research,” said Williams.

To further streamline their change request process, AnnuityNet plans to enable clients themselves to log into Visual Intercept Web Relay to check the status of change control requests and other incidents. Elsinore Technologies' Web Relay extends Visual Intercept to users beyond the development team—including other company resources, Beta testers, end users, partners and clients—allowing critical players to contribute to the issue management process via an intranet or through the web. Web Relay is designed specifically for users who need to be able to enter and track incidents of interest — but who do not and should not have access to manager-exclusive, code sensitive, quality assurance or other detailed development information.

“Our ultimate goal using Visual Intercept is to give a customized version of Web Relay to each company that we do business with so that they can report bugs, make change control requests or log whatever tasks they need us to perform directly through the Visual Intercept interface,” said Vaughn. “This would allow for faster issue resolution and would allow us to use Visual Intercept exclusively in managing incidents and issues from start to finish.”

AnnuityNet also plans to leverage Visual Intercept's Crystal Reports interface to generate work estimates and invoices directly from Visual Intercept. Streamlining their estimating and invoicing processes will help AnnuityNet push products out to its customers more quickly.

“We're an ever-evolving company, and Visual Intercept gives us the ability to quickly, efficiently and reliably modify our business model as needed,” concluded Williams.

About AnnuityNet, Inc.

AnnuityNet, a Herndon, VA-based software technology company, pioneered the Web-based approach to powering transactions in the annuity market space with an Internet platform that connects all industry constituencies – carriers and manufacturers, distributors and point of sale representatives and customers – into a seamless, secure and information-rich process. After becoming the first company to engineer paperless annuities on the Web, AnnuityNet designed and developed technology solutions for financial services institutions that are transforming the way the industry sells and services annuities. AnnuityNet's Web technology currently processes nearly \$2 billion per month in annuity transactions over the Internet. AnnuityNet was founded in 1997 by well-known actuary and entrepreneur Shane Chalke, and is owned by a blue-ribbon consortium of financial industry organizations including GE Equity, Lincoln Financial Group, Conning Capital Partners, FBR Financial Services Partners, SunLife Financial, Phoenix Life, Ohio National Financial and Bank One. The company's Web site address is www.annuitynet.com.

About Elsinore Technologies, Inc.

Elsinore Technologies, Inc., www.elsitech.com, was founded in 1995 to enable software development teams to better manage issues during all phases of the software development life cycle. Now, Elsinore Technologies' Visual Intercept enterprise work management platform is the industry's only completely scalable, closed-loop system for managing both the planned tasks and unexpected events and issues associated with work. Visual Intercept's project-oriented approach to work management is highly intuitive and easily customizable to meet the needs of each company and each user. Designed from the ground up to integrate with all Microsoft® development and productivity tools, Visual Intercept is a tightly integrated, best-of-breed platform that maximizes productivity and provides rapid ROI. Thousands of customers in 35 countries are benefiting from Visual Intercept in a diverse range of work management applications.