



Microsoft BizTalk Server
Microsoft ASP



Summary

Country: Belgium

Sector: building and renovation

Profile Unilin Flooring

Unilin Flooring produces laminate flooring such as the well-known Quick-Step – laid without glue. The company is the showpiece of the fast-growing Unilin group.

Business situation

Unilin supports its growth with automation. Microsoft BizTalk Server connects Unilin's e-commerce platform with heterogeneous systems at the customers' sites. To simplify management, its own systems are also linked through Microsoft BizTalk.

Solution

Alongside the implementation of a new ERP system, Unilin is installing Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004 as an integration linchpin for e-commerce and internal applications. Unilin is simultaneously changing its e-commerce platform over to ASP .NET.

Benefits

- fast and flexible management of automatic processes, also for non-IT specialists
- simpler infrastructure and management
- highly scalable system
- a platform for future integration and further automation



Rapidly growing Unilin creates flexible management for highly automated processes

"BizTalk is already the integration linchpin for our e-commerce platform and soon also for our internal business applications. This way we can manage and modify all processes with one system."

Hans Valcke, project leader Internet & integration at Unilin

One click and it's done! Unilin Flooring loves simple, seamless connections and not only when it comes to laminate flooring. At Unilin then, innovation is not just restricted to the production department. The rapid growth of the company is also being supported by far-reaching automation of the underlying business processes. To allow even more IT systems to talk to one another, the company is updating the Microsoft BizTalk integration platform behind its e-commerce system.

Unilin is taking advantage of the changeover to a new ERP system to enable the connections between all its internal applications to run through the new Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004. The goal: a single point where numerous internal and external systems merge into well-organised and flexibly manageable processes that can also be modified by non-IT specialists.

Integrating heterogeneous systems for e-commerce

Unilin Flooring, producer of laminate flooring including the well-known Quick-Step, which can be laid without glue, is the showpiece of the Unilin group. For two years in a row, the fast-growing company has been declared the "Trends Gazelle" of the big West Flemish companies by the weekly *Trends*. To keep pace with its rapid growth, Unilin is automating a lot of the underlying business processes.

In 2000 Unilin Flooring launched an e-commerce platform for smoother collaboration with its customers. Through this website, they receive the most recent product information, geared to the range that they sell. It is also possible to place orders, follow up and consult the complete order history, and all this round the clock. This means the sales department is being gradually released from the manual entry of orders that come in by fax and telephone, a time-consuming and error-prone chore.

Central to the e-commerce system was Microsoft BizTalk Server 2000. This technology ensured that the entire platform could communicate with underlying systems, at Unilin as well as its customers. Unilin was so pleased with the possibilities and the flexibility of this integration platform that it also wanted to use Microsoft BizTalk to enable its internal business systems to talk to one another. "Currently all these systems work together through direct, so-called point-to-point connections, each with their own interface. If something changes in one application, then we have to modify all the applications with which it is connected and this requires a lot of work," explains Hans Valcke.

Coupling internal systems to the integration platform too

The applications of the e-commerce platform are built using Microsoft's technology for interactive web pages – Active Server Pages (ASP). The site runs under Microsoft Windows 2000 and relies on the database Microsoft SQL Server and

various Microsoft servers for e-business. At first Microsoft BizTalk Server 2000 made sure that the platform could communicate with underlying systems.

"To keep the website running continuously, we opted for an integrated but asynchronous approach – there is no direct connection with our underlying systems, but instead a constant sending back and forth of messages. In this, BizTalk takes care of the message stream as well as the conversion of the data into the right format for further processing. All information relating to the e-commerce platform is kept separate, so that it stays active if any underlying systems are shut down, for example for operations," explains Hans Valcke, project leader Internet and integration at Unilin Flooring.

"Small customers mainly use the online order form. With the bigger clients we had already previously worked with electronic data exchange or EDI. For the medium-sized players, we developed mail orders. They often have an application that generates orders in a data format that is not practical for us. Still, they can simply e-mail these files. BizTalk then converts them into a form that our ERP system understands. This is easier and less expensive than straight EDI," according to Hans Valcke.

At the moment, Unilin is changing over to Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004. Integration specialist CODdit is carrying out this implementation and HP is supplying the necessary infrastructure. Hans Valcke: "Because we are implementing a new ERP system from SAP, we are using the opportunity to enable the connections between all our internal applications, such as those for warehouse management, planning and shop floor, to run through BizTalk as well. That's why we are installing the newest version. We are simultaneously transferring our e-commerce platform over to Microsoft ASP .NET technology because of the greater ease of use."

Central, uniform control of all automatic processes

Thanks to Microsoft BizTalk then, for some time now customers have been able to place their orders in various ways, with Unilin able to process this variety of order forms automatically. After all, Microsoft BizTalk delivers them in an appropriate uniform way to the underlying applications. Meanwhile, the internal systems are also being linked to one another through the new Microsoft BizTalk 2004. Thanks to this updated technology, Unilin can actually simplify its e-commerce infrastructure. After all, thanks to Microsoft BizTalk adapter for the ERP package from SAP, fewer servers are needed.

According to Hans Valcke, Microsoft BizTalk offers many possibilities for a good price. One of the main advantages is the ease with which you can connect additional systems and applications so as to steer processes in an identical way through a central point. Using Microsoft BizTalk 2004, Unilin is currently creating a single communications layer where all passing data traffic, both for internal and external processes, is converted and managed. So, internal and external computer systems aren't just able to exchange data. You can also use one system to intervene in the processes containing these data streams and give non-IT specialists means of making functional modifications.

"Maintenance and development are highly simplified with BizTalk," says project leader Hans Valcke. "You have a better overview and modifications have to happen just once. You put them into BizTalk and indicate the applications in which they should be implemented. This way you can quickly take technological advantage of new plans and actions. And if something goes wrong, you just have to look in one place for the cause."

Moreover, the system is transparent and user-friendly. Technical interventions can also be carried out by supporting IT personnel. "So we don't have to speak to our developers for problem solving and modifications every time. The system also

gives an automatic warning by mail or SMS if something is wrong, so you can react faster," says Sam Vanhoutte, BizTalk & .NET developer at Unilin.

So, functional interventions can also be carried out by non-IT specialists from the familiar Microsoft Office environment. Hans Valcke: "We want to make forms with InfoPath that allow end-users to put changes into BizTalk or deal with hitches. You could even program a workflow with them. If the person in charge does not respond to a mail signalling a problem within a certain time period, then the query automatically goes to the next person concerned."

And there are even more future plans. "Although we are continuing to use our existing package for connections for EDI processes with big customers, in the future we will still make a stopover at BizTalk. The convenience of central process management and uniform processing of data is too important. With the e-commerce platform in ASP .NET and the new BizTalk, we will soon have two top trumps for further developing our automation project without calling on third parties. In the meantime, we have sufficient experience with these technologies to allow us to implement the company philosophy and our aims immediately," concludes Sam Vanhoutte.

More information

For more information about Microsoft's products and services, call +32 (0)2 704 30 00 or visit our website at www.microsoft.com/belux.

For more information about CODit, surf to www.codit.be. You will find more information about HP at www.hp.be.

For more information about Quick-Step, you can go to www.quick-step.com. You can find more information about Unilin at www.unilin.com.

About Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004

With Microsoft BizTalk Server you can flexibly develop and manage business processes within and between organisations. It allows you to integrate applications and information streams simply and so establish reliable, secure business relations with clients and partners through the Internet. Thanks to the support of important web technologies such as XML and SOAP, you have available open standards and specifications for allowing heterogeneous systems to work together, irrespective of the operating system, the programming model or the programming language.

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