

GEFCO Wins CIO-Online's 2009 "Grand Prize" and "Prize for Innovation"

GEFCO Places a Search Engine at the Center of Its Operations

GEFCO, one of Europe's top ten logistics groups, drives innovation by using a familiar tool – a simple search engine – for an uncommon end: consolidating business information and more effectively managing operations.

From CIO Magazine, No. 5, April 2009 (France)¹: As a logistics specialist in the automotive sector, GEFCO's clients naturally rely on them to provide timely information about the status of their products, whether those products are new vehicles in route from a factory to a dealer, or a shipment of parts in transit between automotive centers. To meet this need, GEFCO was tracking 100,000 daily events concerning 100,000 vehicles using a 3TB Oracle database, and making this data available to customers through a Web portal.

Needs Outpacing Technologies...

With an increasing level of activity due to the arrival of new partners and clients (DM, Dacia, Honda, etc.) and an expansion to additional countries (Russia, the Ukraine, etc.), the technologies available to customers via GEFCO's portal were losing their effectiveness: data latency rates were reaching unacceptable levels, simple yet voluminous information requests were handicapping internal transaction processing, and the load on the entire system was becoming more problematic by the day.



REAL, PRACTICAL INNOVATION IN A DIFFICULT CONTEXT

Comments from the Jury

Concerning the Grand Prize Winner, Carine Guillemette, Managing Director of Now Consulting, notes: "In effect, the GEFCO project represents high-stake business issues for an innovative company experiencing strong growth and profitability in a particularly difficult economic context."

"With GEFCO, we see real innovation in the face of a highly challenging yet commonplace problem," adds Bertrand Eteneau. He elaborates: "We're all struggling with massive amounts of information from diverse sources - ERP, mainframes, etc.- but until now, we have only had recourse to very complex tools to effect data consolidation and produce business intelligence, not to mention the persistent challenges associated with data consistency. And if the data model chosen for the datawarehouse was ill-suited to evolving demands from senior management, costly and lengthy modifications were necessary. The search engine approach eliminates these concerns. It provides rapid results, even if it doesn't replace a true datawarehouse, which is still indispensable for consolidations in which reliability is more important than speed. The ideal is to ultimately combine these two approaches."

Carine Guillemette concludes: "GEFCO's project is a success. They've achieved significant results after only nine months: rich functionality, high-volume performance, effective security management, non-intrusive deployment and operation, and a solid return on investment. In addition, the project reinforces GEFCO's image as an innovator in the logistics domain."

¹: Translated from the French; original article available at www.cio-online.com/telechargement.php?id=5#sommaire



Against this challenging backdrop, GEFCO wanted to provide its clients with real-time reporting on the operations entrusted to them. In fact, supplying timely, high quality information is an important competitive advantage in the logistics industry.

An Unpleasant Dilemma

And so GEFCO faced an unpleasant dilemma: they could drastically curtail portal access to improve internal IS operations, or they could undertake a complex and costly overhaul, deploying a traditional decision intelligence platform supported by a consolidated datawarehouse. Neither option was appealing to GEFCO. ST Groupe therefore proposed Exalead's CloudView™ search engine as an alternative strategy.

A Solution in Less Than 6 Months

At a cost of 700,000 Euros (450,000 of which covered direct hardware and software costs), the project itself did not require an in-depth study of ROI: the cost was marginal given the strategic importance of information distribution to the company.

Reducing Costs While Preserving Existing Investments

Less than six months later, the deployment of the Exalead solution had enabled GEFCO to meet all its needs. GEFCO was able to scale information access without having to scale the underlying database infrastructure at considerable cost, and it was able to guarantee the future scalability and adaptability of its applications while preserving its investment in its existing infrastructure, which was still being used for internal operations.



With the new system, the cost per user was immediately cut in half. The new platform runs on a farm of basic Linux servers while GEFCO's Oracle database infrastructure remains on a high-capacity Unix cluster (pSeries IBM). This means the portal can be adapted and scaled as requirements evolve at a markedly reduced cost.

Why Didn't Anyone Think of This Before?

During the diagnostic phase, Exalead was able to produce an operational prototype in only 10 days. ST Groupe then developed the definitive release. The new portal was developed within an open-source JBoss Seam framework, as part of an overall strategic approach favoring open source technologies (the Linux servers are hosted at Atos).

A Well-Known Tool...A New Context

"Why didn't anyone think of this before?" wondered Guillaume Rabier, who is in charge of GEFCO IT studies and projects. "The challenges we were facing were not new, and neither is the technology applied in response." In this case, the radical innovation was employing a well-known tool within a completely new context. However, this wisdom of this revolutionary approach was not immediately evident to all. "The main challenge was convincing IT staff that a search engine was really the answer to our problem," recalls Rabier.

Verifying the System's Reliability

Now, seeing is believing. "Every day, I see thousands of events consolidated in real-time and I log on to the system just to be sure it's real!" exclaims Rabier. This doesn't mean, he adds, that there was no technical work to perform—"there was, but the difficulty level wasn't high. In particular, we needed to verify the reliability of the system, to be absolutely sure everything was working as it should. If you lose a document on the Internet, it's not a big deal. But if you lose a vehicle, that's a problem..." Fortunately the new system has proven to be extremely reliable.

Notes Rabier, "the stability and performance of the application is astonishing given its highly innovative character."

Astonishing Stability

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Guillaume Rabier, GEFCO

No User Training Needed

In addition, the familiarity of search engines to end users eased the transition to the new system. The changeover was not a major problem even though the number of users increased dramatically, with access expanded from a few hundred to several thousand users. And no training was necessary, which allowed for swift deployment. The roll out of another technical solution would have undoubtedly been more complicated.

Thematic Data Clustering, Strong Security

There are a lot of search engines on the market. Why didn't GEFCO choose another product, for example a Google box? "Exalead captivated us for two essential reasons" explains Guillaume Rabier. "First of all, the search results are presented in a consolidated fashion, by categories: the results aren't displayed in long lists of links based on page rank or some other debatable criteria not relevant in a business context. Instead the results are automatically categorized and presented by thematic clusters for easy navigation and search refinement. In addition, and maybe even more importantly, security rules are integrated into the heart of the engine and not in a higher application layer—an approach that is always more fragile. It is evident that we can't have Peugeot tapping into Opel's data when they access our portal."

Answers in Less Than One Second

When clients go to the portal for logistical information regarding their products, they now obtain the answers they need in less than a second, even if the information requested is in fact derived from a multitude of database tables.

A Unified Vision, Timely Data, and a Rapid ROI

"The platform offers a unified vision of data," notes GEFCO. In spite of this unified view, indexation can be differential and incremental, so the system's updating capacity is significant. GEFCO also emphasizes the importance of the non-intrusiveness of the system vis-à-vis the source transactional infrastructure. This non-intrusiveness, together with the usability described above, enabled a very rapid deployment. Moreover, "the solution's return on investment (ROI) has been optimal, particularly in light of the existing infrastructure's limited scalability."

High Versatility

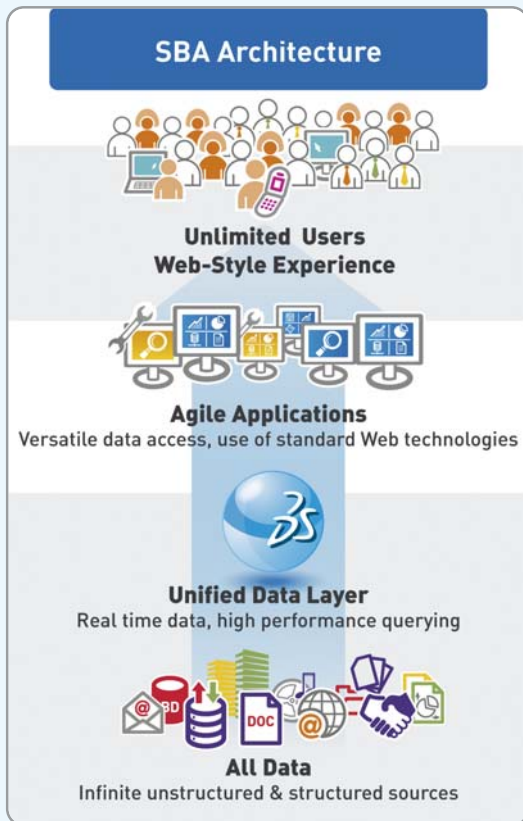
The types of information that can be accessed through the portal are also very diverse. One can request vehicle and part tracking information (“Where is Mr. Johnson’s car?”), route tracing data (“Where has Mr. Johnson’s car been?”), and operational reporting (“How many cars of this particular type in this particular area are currently being transported, stocked, or modified?”).

Added Bonus: An Innovative Image

The Exalead solution, and the receipt of these two prizes, has brought GEFCO a much-appreciated side benefit: GEFCO’s reputation as an innovative company has been reinforced.

ABOUT CLOUDVIEW

CloudView is the leading infrastructure platform for Search-Based Applications (SBAs) like the GEFCO Logistics Extranet. Versatile SBAs are being used to:



Extend Business Applications

SBAs bring new agility and expanded scope to enterprise applications like CRM, ERP, SCM, and Business Intelligence (BI) by enriching structured data with important emotive and qualitative data from vast ‘unstructured’ sources like email, blogs, chat, phone transcripts, and Web pages.

Create Innovative Online Applications

SBAs can add instant depth and stickiness to portals via innovative ‘mash-up’ applications, that is to say applications that merge content and functionality from diverse sources such as databases, mapping services, business applications and the Web.

Improve Database Applications

SBAs provide access to database content that is 100s of times faster and far cheaper than traditional database querying. SBAs are also more agile, supporting structured queries, fuzzy natural language search, on-the-fly operational reporting, and faceted navigation.



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