Momentum Life Develops Go-Anywhere software in RCP

"RCP has the right mix of light-weight, administration smarts and ease of use to flourish in the demanding IT world of South Africa."

South Africa is a big country. With many communities scattered hundreds of miles from the big financial centers, extending corporate networks over slow Internet connections can be tricky business.

Momentum Life is a unit of FirstRand, one of the largest financial institutions in South Africa with over US $119 billion under administration. Aspire, a new unit of Momentum Life, sells long-term insurance products throughout South Africa.

With decentralized sales call centers and a network of over 1,000 brokers in branch offices scattered across the country, Momentum needed to develop a customized sales application light enough to run over slow connections, yet easy to support once it is unleashed to the field. And they needed the ability to centrally administer changes from the same code base.

Threading a bandwidth needle

Momentum knew that bandwidth restrictions would be a critical concern when selecting a strategic direction, and that they would have to minimize traffic by deploying centrally managed rich clients. As Martin Coetzee, Senior Java Developer, explains, "we have real challenges working over the Internet in South Africa. Only big organizations have the bandwidth that North

Momentum's call centers use Aspire's scripted questionnaires to prepare insurance quotes. Scripts and business logic are easy to maintain using the Eclipse Update Manager.

Americans and Europeans take for granted to their homes."

They also knew that, since their users won't have standard desktops, with some running Linux and others on various flavors of Windows, they needed to eliminate OS dependencies by building self-contained applications.
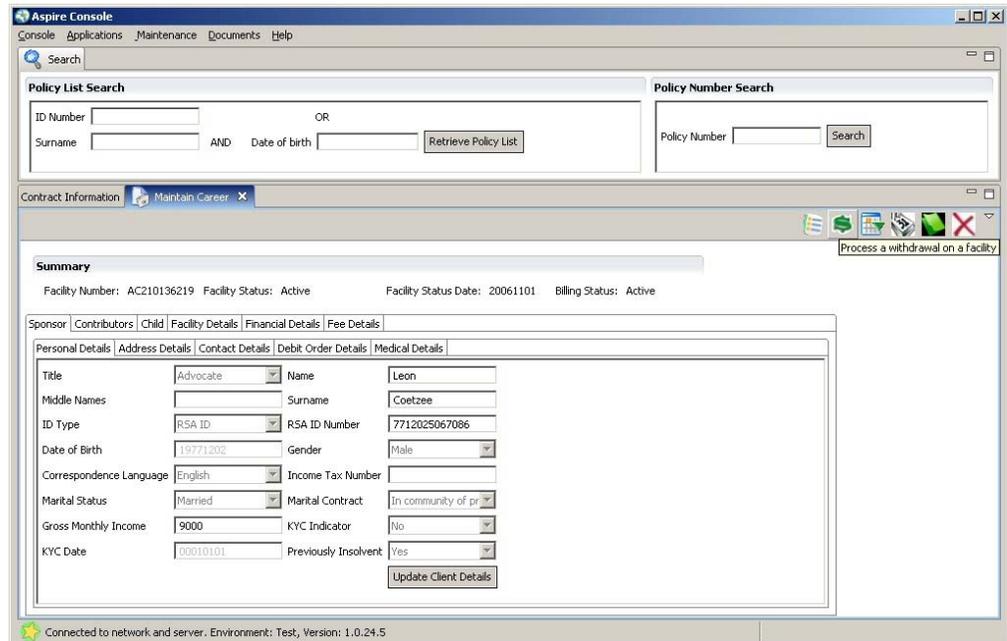
Having in-house strengths in Java, they did a quick proof of concept with Eclipse RCP and liked the speed of development, fast and familiar GUI support, and the framework approach.

functionality a user needs. The plug-in approach allowed them to break the sales console into over 20 small functional plug-ins, any of which can be deployed independently.

Central office administrators can search for, review and update any policy in the system.

A Nimble Development Strategy

Getting up and running with RCP was painless for Momentum's developers. Being familiar with Java, they found that a quick look at the freely available samples and tutorials got them up to speed. In fact, as Coetzee relates, developing Aspire was incredibly fast. "We went from a dead start to a built product in three months. Developing the same functionality as a web application would have taken us at least three time as long."

Bandwidth is such a scarce resource in South Africa that the Eclipse plug-in architecture gave them real advantages. When the time comes to update, patch or repair an installation, Momentum only needs to deliver the discreet pieces of

They also used plug-ins to create an Admin Console version of Aspire that makes it easy to administer and service of policies and products. Plug-ins also provide head office managers with advanced features such as reporting and the ability to create and manage templates for standard customer correspondence. Momentum simply created this administrative functionality as a superset of the base Sales Console product. "Building the sales and Admin Consoles with RCP really showed us the potential to assemble new products quickly from existing plug-ins by mixing and matching what we need" said Coetzee.

The rich client approach also allowed disconnected operation in the field.

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Brokers can visit remote customers, work through insurance quotes, and capture policy details, then update Momentum's central database over any available Internet connection via web services.

Leveraging a vibrant community

Momentum also leveraged other Eclipse projects. For example, Eclipse BIRT, the freely available Business Intelligence and Reporting Tools made it easy to incorporate reports. Integrating BIRT was quick and simple, and allows them to quickly design new reports requested by managers.

Momentum knows RCP was the right choice for their application needs. They've been able to develop mission-critical business software in record time, and successfully deploy it in a demanding network environment.

They are already looking at innovative ways to enhance Aspire, such as porting the RCP plug-ins to an application server. As Dean James-Everett, Software Architect, explains, this 3-tier approach would allow them to blend centralized

validation, consistency checks and other application server benefits with modularity, extensibility and other strengths of RCP.

From rapid development to the speed of delivery over the slow connections that criss-cross the country, Eclipse has been central to making the launch of Aspire financial services a success. As Coenie van der Merwe, IT Manager at Momentum Aspire explains: "Our Eclipse RCP based system is in production for more than a year and has proved to be a very stable, scalable and robust solution. In any dynamic business environment where IT needs to be the business enabler, you need to use technology that provides for speed of development, ease of use and platform independence."

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