



ECN Group: Improving Profits in Helping Companies Communicate Electronically

Company Background: Getting Business Partners to Work Together

Established in 1996 to provide a Managed Messaging Service for the New Zealand Customs Service, the ECN Group has rapidly expanded to offer a broad suite of integration and messaging solutions. Headquartered in Wellington, New Zealand, the company today is a leader in B2B messaging as well as Business Process Management (BPM) and Enterprise Application Integration (EAI) and maintains offices in Auckland New Zealand, Australia and Manila. Its many and diverse customers include DHL, HP, 3M, Philips, and Sony.

A large part of ECN's business consists of providing B2B hosted services, acting as a messaging broker to handle all the complexity of document conversion through to multiple companies in the supply chain so that ECN's customers just deal with one party — ECN.

"We provide our clients and their trading partners with a cost-effective means of doing business electronically by automating the exchange of transactional information between all types of systems," explains Alasdair Turnbull, manager of special projects at ECN. "It's mainly in the supply chain: processing orders, receiving receipts — that sort of thing."

The Challenge: Implementation Eating into Profits

In the typical B2B scenario, a customer's trading partner sends ECN a file in a proprietary format that does not fit directly with the customer's internal systems. ECN receives the file and translates it into any number of different formats and dispatches it to the customer, ensuring that it is received and processed successfully. ECN also deals with more complex B2B requirements, such as any-to-any translation.

A number of factors drove ECN's decision to seek a better conversion solution. The first and foremost goal was to increase profitability.

"Basically, the bulk of our profit comes not from the actual building of the software, but through our customers' use of it," Turnbull says. "With our existing system we could not charge customers enough to cover our implementation costs, so we had to recoup it during production. We were making a lot of revenue but not as much profit as we'd like."

Turnbull explains that a B2B implementation by ECN involves, consultation with a customer to understand their existing file formats and IT platforms, consultation with the customer's trading partners, development to map the diverse file formats used by various trading partners to the customer's file formats, and comprehensive testing. While the process is painless on the customer's side by design, behind the scenes on the ECN and supplier side it could often get quite complex.

"A B2B implementation could take anywhere from about 12 hours to about 40 hours," Turnbull says. "While they're not particularly large, when you add in modifications to existing and new implementations we can have about 40 or 50 running concurrently — and it can go as high as a hundred or so."

The existing process involved a programmer as well as a business analyst — typically a technical business analyst with some project management skills. A fair degree of cross-skills was required in order to interact with customers and their suppliers.

"If you've ever done anything like this," says Turnbull, "you know that trying to get two companies to talk to each other is not that easy on the telephone, let alone using the same business languages."

Delays caused by the bottleneck of the required programming on the part of the ECN staff would also impact the customer end, as well.

"What would sometimes happen is that you'd have some of these really small projects that a customer would be interested in to begin with, but once it bogged down in the development queue, the interest and knowledgeability on the customer side would fade," Turnbull says. "We'd face about a half a day's process just to get them up to speed again."

"We wanted to speed up the whole process," he says in summing it up. "We wanted a system where a business analyst who was relatively technical could do it themselves, without the need for a programmer. We wanted a system that was in a modern language. And we wanted it to be quick, where a system analyst could take a message file from a supplier, drop it into a system, look at the output, and map it to the customer system using XML."

The goal:

Reduce the amount of time and degree of expertise required to implement file conversions.

Why they selected

DataDirect:

DataDirect XML Converters with the Stylus Studio IDE met the criteria of Java and flat file data support; quality service and support was a deciding factor in the final analysis.

Business benefits:

Reduction in implementation time and staff resources increases production profitability; fast turn-around saves time having to reacquaint customers with the project.

Technical benefits:

Stylus Studio can handle the company's 200–300 different formats it processes.

Special Note:

The DataDirect Data Integration Suite provides the functionality of Stylus Studio, DataDirect XQuery, and DataDirect XML Converters as a single package.

For more information, visit:
www.datadirect.com
www.XMLconverters.com



The Solution: All Roads Lead to DataDirect Technologies

ECN embarked on an evaluation project to source a new B2B platform that met ECN's specific needs as a supplier of hosted translation services. The outcome of the evaluation project was that none of the available "off the shelf" system totally satisfied ECN's requirements and therefore the decision was taken to investigate providing the new platform by using a graphically capable XML tool set working with the existing in house developed Java platform, used to house style sheets.

Various XML tool sets were evaluated including DataDirect XML Converters™ with the Stylus Studio® XML Integrated Development Environment (IDE).

As it turned out, the key deciding factor came down to a matter of service and support — such as DataDirect's award-winning SupportLink Web site, which provides two-way communication between the DataDirect team and customers in the field to continuously improve the quality and breadth of the knowledgebase.

"Service was the big differentiator," says Turnbull. "We liked that DataDirect would assign us one person entirely informed about our issues that we could get on the phone with. We were also very impressed with the information available on the support Web site."

The Results: Cutting Implementation Efforts in Half

While service was a decisive factor in ECN's decision to implement DataDirect XML Converters and Stylus Studio, Turnbull is quick to point out that the products themselves provide a considerable winning edge, as well.

"The Stylus Studio software is clear in its presentation," he says. "The Java support and flat-file Wizard suited our criteria, and were better than anything else available."

DataDirect XML Converters used by ECN are high-performance Java components that provide bi-directional, programmatic access to virtually any non-XML file (EDI, flat files, etc.). They can automatically transform thousands of flat file formats to XML and back with no development required. They can be used to stream practically any non-XML data source into XML as part of a multi-stage XML processing pipeline, which can all be easily developed and tested in Stylus Studio.

The Stylus Studio IDE automates and accelerates development process for XML's verbose and self-describing syntax, which is generally cumbersome to work with manually. Productivity gains are also achieved using Stylus Studio's abundant XML developer features — including XML conversion utilities — which automate commonly performed developer tasks.

"That's another thing we found attractive about Stylus Studio over the competition," says Turnbull. "Doing business in diverse parts of the world, we do some 40 or 50 different file formats. Add the different document types on top of that, and you're probably talking two to three hundred formats that we have to contend with, all of which we can handle using Stylus Studio."

The solution that ECN runs today is a Java framework, with DataDirect XML Converters on the front end to convert the various incoming file formats to XML, and Stylus Studio for B2B translation. Turnbull estimates that once all of the existing legacy implementations are converted over to the new platform it will be handling some 25 Million messages per annum.

"We've definitely saved substantial money," he reports. "It's my belief that an implementation that would have taken us 24 hours the old way should now take us about 12. So we're talking about at least a 50 percent reduction in implementation cost."

Turnbull notes that this cost saving is strictly confined to the implementation on ECN's side. It does not take into account the additional savings in time realized by delivering a solution rapidly, before the customer requires a refresher course on the project.

"The savings on our end are purely because we now have the ability to have a single person provide the solution to the customer using the Stylus Studio product," he says. "If you add the time we save having to get the customer back up to speed due to delays, we're probably closer to a 60 percent cost reduction."

But customer satisfaction with the process may be the best result, which is difficult to put a price on.

"Faster turnaround is how our customers benefit, Turnbull concludes. "Less waiting from the time they sign the contract to the time when they can actually go live."

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Alasdair Turnbull
Manager of Special Projects
ECN Group

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