

Littlewoods

Business



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Company: TransoftCustomer: LittlewoodsSubmitted by: TransoftDate: June 2002Currently employing over 25, 000 people, Littlewoods was originally founded in 1923 as a football pools business. Since then, Littlewoods has undergone a number of changes and has grown into one of the UK's largest and most successful private businesses. The home shopping business was originally launched in 1932, with the first retail store opening in 1937.

Changes to modern shopping habits saw the launch in 1985 of the Index catalogue and the first Index store. As part of the organisations group integration strategy, the aim was to bring together the autonomous businesses of Index, Home Shopping and Retail. Each had its own Board of Directors focussed on its own specific business issues. More importantly, each member of the group had its own IT strategy as appropriate to its own business needs. Then Littlewoods decided to create the UK's leading multi-channel retail business, enabling customers to shop through the widest variety of channels and formats.

With this re-evaluation of the brand strategy for the group, the time was right to focus on integration and consolidation of the disparate IT systems in use across all of the group's businesses. To achieve their aims Littlewoods had to bring together all their systems and applications and consolidate the IT skills and resources around a platform and database of choice. Following an in-depth review, around the time of their Y2K preparations in late 1998, the strategic decision was made to establish their system based on the Sun Solaris server and Oracle relational database. They would then progressively eliminate their Bull, DEC Alpha and other proprietary platforms. By mid 1999 the Y2K testing had been completed and Littlewoods had evaluated their

requirements platform by platform in terms of the strategic benefits of elimination. They were then able to eliminate certain platforms fairly quickly, once the transfer of related applications to the Sun system had been completed.

With regard to their Bull DPS system, a number of the applications were due to be replaced by May 2001, but one of the critical applications for Home Shopping was not due to be replaced until May 2002. This created the dilemma of whether to transfer it to the Solaris platform with an Oracle relational database, or whether to maintain the existing Bull system for a further year. The decision was taken to migrate and one of Littlewoods suppliers, PTC Solutions, introduced Transoft as a partner who could undertake this Bull migration. “ Transoft won the tender because of our confidence in their capabilities and their flexibility to be able to support the migrated application after the Bull was finally switched off” said Steve Lock, IT Development Director for Littlewoods. The decision was then made to proactively consolidate IT resources sooner rather than later and to move the application and shut the Bull system as early as possible. This project then commenced under the aptly named banner of ‘ Project Matador’.

This work was carried out using the Transoft Application Transformation suite and involved moving a custom written COBOL '74 warehouse stock-to-bin allocation system from the Bull GCOS COBOL machine to the Sun Solaris platform and the data from the IDSII database to Oracle. The key technical issue which was faced was to migrate the application to use an Oracle database whilst retaining as much as possible of the user interface. Transoft achieved this by using their Legacy Liberator toolset to convert the Bull

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COBOL programs to Micro Focus COBOL and to rebuild the screens with a look and feel derived from the Bull application. Transoft also implemented a new version of their Input Output Module technology to recreate IDS II access paths against an Oracle database. However, migrating from a non-relational database to an RDBMS is not just about mechanically replicating access routes.

Invariably, because of the fundamental difference in the structure, considerable effort has to be employed to tune particular access paths to obtain the desired performance. Transoft has considerable skills and experience in this tricky task. The end result was that the programs behaved much as they did on the Bull in terms of screen navigation and user interface, whilst reading and writing data to the Oracle database with good performance. This was the first project jointly undertaken by partners Transoft and PTC. Mike Edwards, chairman at Transoft explained, “ At that time part of Littlewoods’ requirements fell outside of our core skills, so it made sense to find a partner to complement our existing expertise.

” He continued, “ The trend today is away from simple application migrations to more complex transformations like this one, and our worldwide total for both is close to 150 projects.” It is surprising to consider that as recently as three years ago, Littlewoods were a leading Bull installation and now they have none.” As with any technical project, there were snags along the way, but Transoft put both technical resources and expertise into the project and together we were able to resolve the issues promptly” added Steve Lock. Commenting on Littlewoods experience of working with Transoft, Lock

added, " I found Transoft easy to work with from the top down; they were very responsive and shared our vision of the project."