

## IT Analysis – Dealing with the “Boring” Stuff

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

At times, it's easy to get caught up in the excitement of the technology de jour—areas such as SOA, Blogs and RFID—forgetting that a) there's not that many real-world practitioners out there yet, and b) there's one hell of a lot more pressing issues for companies based on dealing with the “boring stuff”.

By the boring stuff, I mean the likes of the “legacy” (or “heritage”) systems that are still doing a decent job, the sheer amounts of textually based report and log information out there and the need just to keep basic systems going.

Now, with legacy systems, there's a whole market sprung up around “modernisation”—taking mainframe and older mid-range systems and creating a newer front end through screen scraping or newer connectivity through the use of web service wrappers and so on from the likes of IBM, Attachmate, Seagull and Neon.

However, a problem that only hits a few companies—but can be a major issue—is where the original program was written in assembler, and the company needs to modernise it; not necessarily for direct functional reasons, but maybe for migration to a different platform or to integrate the solution into other solutions. One company that has a capability here is Software Migrations Ltd, a highly specialised UK based company that can analyse existing assembler based programs and create the exact same functions in either C or Cobol, as the customer wants. As this is direct functional replication, Software Migrations states that it is rapid and generally free of faults—this is direct functional transformation—only redundant or spaghetti code is removed and the direct functionality itself is not changed or optimised. That either or both of these can be done after the C or Cobol code has been created is seen by Software Migrations as a side benefit, but not something for them to get involved in.

A neat solution to those who are sitting there with a chunk of functionality that has little or no documentation, and where the skills are either getting close to retirement, or have already gone.

Another problem comes from all the applications and devices that we are now building up around the organisation which all throw out text-based, rather than database-based report data. For example, all the log file information that comes from devices such as firewalls, anti-spam appliances, security devices and so on—there is so much that we tend to turn off certain types of reporting to save space. Then, when

something does go wrong, we find that we don't have the necessary information stored to find root cause. There's also the masses of relatively unchanging data that we hold around customers (name, address, historical information), much of which is often not held in a formal database, but in flat files. There are many transactions which we would like to be able to prove the audit trail of—information such as the audit path for e-mails across an enterprise, for example. Again, much of this must not be changed, is held in flat files but is important in these days of audit and compliance. Storing, consolidating and searching through this sea of information can be a major headache and can slow down the systems that are trying to create the information and can create massive overheads for companies.

CopperEye is another specialist company that provides one means of dealing with this problem; a means of consolidating such data across multiple sources if necessary, and then using standard ODBC queries. The solution is not aimed at small data volumes—a core market is the telecommunications vendors looking to deal with millions to billions of textual records—but enables companies to build up a system where reporting is far easier, where data retention can be driven by policy, where compliance needs can be easily dealt with, and where customer satisfaction can be improved. Search response times are very rapid, meaning that the CopperEye solution (‘Greenwich’ and ‘Search’) can be integrated with existing CRM or help desk solutions to feed back information directly to agents in near real time.

Neither of these companies is looking at solving problems that every company has, nor are they trying to be the glitzy new boys on the block talking about all the latest technologies and dropping in all the buzz words and TLAs. However, from what I see out there, the solutions work and they certainly solve problems that are crucial to their customers.

A lot of an organisation's success is based on a lot of mundane detail—having the likes of Software Migrations and CopperEye around means that the detail can be dealt with—often freeing up time and resources to investigate the more “exciting” stuff. The problem for both these companies could well be that their target markets can be easily saturated but for the moment, there's plenty of scope for success.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

## Quocirca Services

The insight and experience that comes from working as an industry analyst as well as a practitioner allows the Quocirca team to contribute significantly to IT Vendors, Service Providers and Corporate clients. To this end, it provides a range of consulting and advisory services. Details of these, along with some of Quocirca's latest analysis, may be obtained by visiting <http://www.quocirca.com>

Quocirca also provides bespoke primary research services through its daughter company QNB Intelligence. This involves interviewing thousands of senior decision makers on a quarterly basis.