

A Ground Swell for Aucon's GUI

By Elizabeth Barnett

Aucon's GUI migration and further development of an old Nixdorf Basic application is enjoying some far-reaching impact in European auto dealerships. And it's all being done using Visual PRO/5®.

When Jos Schrier set about automating the administration of a storm-surge barrier project off the coast of the Netherlands in 1978, he had no idea he would end up years out working on a GUI migration project that could net his company widespread industry recognition and an increase in profits very soon.



See EEC's transformation to GUI on this issue's CD.

The project is the development of a turnkey GUI application called Easy Car Connect (ECC), involving the GUI migration of a character-based, automotive dealership application written in Nixdorf Basic. One part of ECC debuted at a Frankfurt trade fair in September. Since then, the ground swell of interest has been overwhelming, Jos says. "The problem is time," he explains. "The dealers want to discuss times, dates, schedules for implementation, and we are still in development."

With clear market demand, Jos' 10-year-old consulting company, Aucon BV, is in an enviable position. Aucon is in the midst of developing the killer GUI app for auto dealerships across Europe that rely on the old Nixdorf application, a dealer management system that employed the Nixdorf Extended Car Administration System (NECAS). At its height, Nixdorf was the Business Basic of choice for about 50 percent of the European middleware market and fully 80 percent of the German middleware market. Applications written in Nixdorf still abound and cross many different industries. Nixdorf is now defunct, for reasons similar to Digital Equipment Corp. and other large U.S. computer companies; it ignored the PC market and realized its mistake all too late.

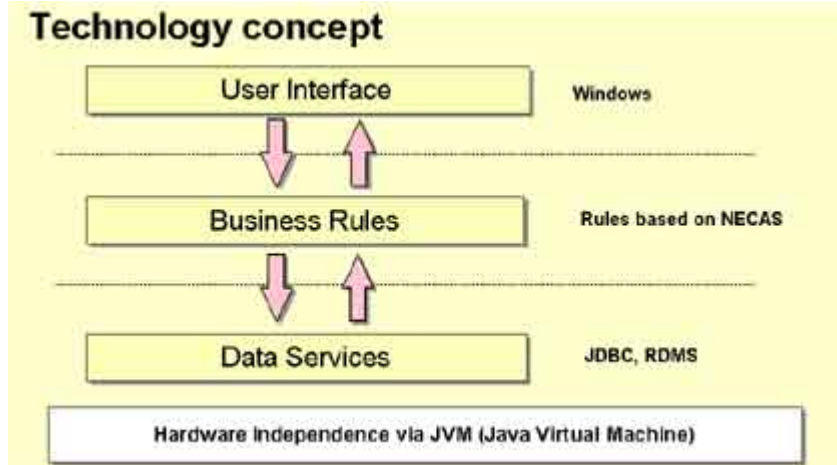
It was Jos' knowledge of Nixdorf Basic, gleaned in the storm-surge barrier project, that brought him into the automotive automation realm. Schooled at a technical nautical college in the Netherlands, Jos was planning on a career as an officer in the commercial shipping industry. Dealing with code and computer automation "were not the goals I was focusing on," Jos says. But in heading the automation of the barrier project administration, he learned a lot about Nixdorf. When Nixdorf folded, the German computer giant Siemens took it over. Siemens wanted to retain Nixdorf's hold in the automotive industry but was only interested in dealing directly with very large auto dealerships and manufacturers. Jos, by that time a Nixdorf consultant, took over installations and support of the management systems at smaller dealerships.

Killing The Killer App

In 1992, Siemens decided it was time to upgrade the dealer management system and create a modern, three-tier, state-of-the-art system. For five years, the story going out to dealers was how much progress was being made on the new system's development. Then, in 1997, Siemens scrapped the project-no product release, no further development and no future.

Aucon was faced with the unpleasant task of letting down customers primed for a slick modern application that would handle all of a dealership's administrative tasks, allowing for scalability and cross-dealer electronic business relationships. What's a creative, dynamic consulting company to do but take up the challenge and create its own application? Jos began by soliciting help through the Internet. BASIS distributor LCS Systemen responded. Once it began look as if Aucon could viably accomplish the project, Aucon bought the Nixdorf dealer management application from Siemens.

In beginning the migration, Aucon first looked to building a compiler for the NECAS business rules, which it wanted to retain for the robustness and scalability that NECAS affords. To date, the Aucon team has completed migrating to GUI about a third of the old dealer management system's programs, having concentrated first on programs dealing with auto parts: the inventorying, warehousing, log-ins and menu systems. All of this was done using Visual PRO/5 and BASIS GUI tools. Still left to do are the programs for dealership repair shops and sales departments. Also completed is an interface in ECC that allows dealerships to choose among standard accounting packages.



Betting on BASIS

Aucon is currently developing ECC using Visual PRO/5. But Jos and the customers who have seen ECC are excited about the possibilities of Internet e-business for car dealerships and cross-platform support in BBj™. They see a clear development path. So Aucon is "betting the business" on BBj. "Opal, BMW and others very much want the ability to link their software to the applications on the Internet," Jos says. "Although the use of the Internet is not as widespread in Europe as in the United States, it absolutely will be. It will follow the U.S. and it is growing." Jos hopes that Aucon's ECC application will be the vehicle to bring not only graphical interfaces but eventually broad e-business capability to Europe's automotive dealerships. From the looks of it now, it's positioned to do just that.