



Terry Osburn, development manager (left), and Carol Stewart, CEO, say CSS's new software solution adds drill-down capabilities and a much-needed GUI.



Cooperative Effort

Control Systems Software
and LANSA team up
to modernize a
core application

By Jim Utsler

“**M**any accounting packages do all sorts of tasks, but they’re often very generic. As a result, you might use only a fraction of what they’re capable of. And if you want to customize them to your business—your specific requirements—you may have to hire someone to do it for you or spend a considerable amount of internal resources to make it fit,” says Kevin Jostes, controller with agribusiness-related Stratton Equity Cooperative Company.

UP eLOSE

Customer: Control Systems Software, LLC

Headquarters: Urbandale, Iowa

Business: Software developer for agribusinesses

Challenge: Moving from a green-screen interface to a graphical interface and improving application functionality

Solution: Using LANSAs RAMP application-development solution to create a simple point-and-click user environment that maintained underlying logic and allowed for application enhancements

Hardware: An IBM Power 550 Express running IBM i

Software: RAMP from LANSAs



His remarks aren't rare. Many companies, especially small to mid-sized ones, modify their operations to conform to their software. For some, this can be beneficial, driving change where it's needed. For others, it can be a detriment, forcing unwanted change.

That's why organizations such as Stratton have turned to solution providers that meet their exact—and exacting—needs. For Stratton and many other agriculture-related businesses, that “vendor” turns out to be the agribusiness-only Control Systems Software, LLC (CSS). Unlike the usual solution provider, CSS is owned by its user members. Thanks to this relationship, users have a great deal of input into how CSS's agribusiness financial application, CONTROL, functions.

Recently, this included a complete overhaul to the software's user interface and some key changes to its underlying architecture. “Our owners call or e-mail us to let us know their must haves, wants, needs, whatever. In this case, there were many requests for an updated, graphical interface,” says Carol Stewart, CSS CEO.

Thanks to this input, CSS began looking for a solution that would provide that and more, finally deciding RAMP from LANSAs would be the best tool to support this development effort. Now, CSS's owners have an application that not only fits their agribusiness model, but also has the modern look, feel and functionality of prepackaged financial applications.

Benefiting Everyone

Based in Urbandale, Iowa, CSS was formed in 1999. Its customers—owners in this case—are agribusiness companies. These companies, in need of cost-effective financial software written specifically for their market, drove the development of the CONTROL application, which runs on member-hosted IBM Power Systems* servers.

The Stratton, Colo.-headquartered Stratton Equity, for example, which has been in business for around 100 years, runs grain elevators and buys agronomy products and equipment for its cooperative members. It uses CONTROL on Power* 520 hardware running IBM i to maintain records relating to these and other transactions. (Stratton Equity also owns a hardware store, a convenience store and three car-care centers, according to Jostes.)

Records maintenance is essential given that Stratton Equity is itself owned by co-op members, including farmers who want to operate under the power-in-numbers ethos. “Co-ops such as ours were formed to allow area farmers to pool all their commodities and then find someone to market them for a better price. After all, it's better to market a million bushels of grain than 5,000 bushels,” Jostes says. That also works on the other side, whether the members are buying fertilizers or fuel. They can get a better rate if they buy mass quantities.

And that's where CSS comes into play. “We couldn't afford to develop this software on our own,” Jostes says. “But as a group—as members of a cooperative—we can keep costs down.

At the same time, we're getting the exact solution we need. If, for example, one business needs a specific feature added to the software, it's likely that we'll all need and benefit from it.”

CSS's Stewart agrees: “If some of the members are calling in with the same needs, we'll reach out to everyone and ask, ‘How many of you would like to see this particular feature included in the software?’ Based on what the majority has to say, we'll then prioritize that request. In the case of changing the application interface, it was unanimous.”

When CONTROL was initially developed, it was green screen only, which at the time was to be expected. But as user expectations changed, especially with increased use of PC-based software and other graphical interfaces, members began asking for an easier-to-navigate front end. Additionally, CSS, which uses an IBM Power 550 Express running IBM i for its development environment, was concerned that prospective members might be put off by the workstation nature of the application.

“One of our member companies—which happens to sit on our board—brought someone in to look at the system. When they saw it and that it was green screen, they said they didn't want it because it was ‘old technology.’ So to remain viable in the marketplace, we decided we needed to move quickly and change the look and feel of CONTROL,” Stewart says.

A Magnificent Job

While attending a May 2007 session at COMMON, CSS representatives talked with several vendors they thought were more closely aligned with their vision of improving the user interface and adding functionality along the way. After winnowing the list to three solution providers, they tasked each with developing proofs of concept.

But that wasn't the clincher. Rather, it was the personal connection LANSAs brought to the table by sending employees to the CSS site to truly understand what CSS wanted to do with the CONTROL application—and then showing the organization what both CSS and LANSAs could accomplish using RAMP.

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—Kevin Jostes,
controller, Stratton Equity Cooperative Company.

“They were very interested in what we were doing, and they created a roadmap of sorts describing how we could get there,” Stewart says. “Once we decided to work with LANSA, they were fantastic in following through and sticking with us throughout the entire process. In fact, they assigned a mentor, or project manager, to us and they did a magnificent job.”

Working as a team, CSS and LANSA began modernizing both the interface and some underlying logic of CONTROL, a task dubbed MOCA (Modernization Of Control Applications). One of the benefits to this approach, particularly pertaining to CSS’s existing code, was that the code could be reused and new code plugged in to augment the entire CONTROL architecture. This helped the organization save a great deal of money compared with rebuilding the application from scratch.

“We get the best of both worlds,” says Terry Osburn, CSS development manager. “With RAMP, we can still use the underlying business logic or code in our current database files, yet, within the LANSA framework, we can also run the new code. So, we now have an application that’s running new LANSA code and legacy code within the same interface.”

A Logical Format

MOCA development began in February 2008 and a beta version of the revamped application was available in January 2009, with Stratton acting as the live test bed. Notably, this happened as Stratton was closing its fiscal year. This might have been a deal breaker for some organizations worried about using live data in a beta application during a crucial time, but Stratton decided this might be the best way to put the updated CONTROL application through its paces.

“When you do these things only once a year, you’re only using specific functions once a year and you forget what they are,” Stratton’s Jostes says. “With the green-screen interface, it sometimes took a while to figure out where this or that report was. Now, it’s right there in front of you. You know this action has to do with grain, so you go to the grain menu. Yes, we were early adopters, but that actually helped us during this period.”

Jostes also says the new interface and enhanced functionality make employees more productive. For example, users would have to go from one screen to another and then to another in the previous version of CONTROL to find multiple but related bits of information about one customer. Now they can click on tabs and menus or search for relevant information from a single point of application interface.

“Everything’s put together in a very logical format,” Jostes says, “Whichever area you’re working in, everything’s likely to be right there, on the screen for people to point and click on. With the green screen, you would have to leave one screen, enter another and then go back to the original one. MOCA has changed how we work.”

Indeed, additional functionality has made CONTROL much more powerful than in the past. Print spool files now go to a database in PDF format instead of to printers. Users can then access those PDFs and bring them up on screen, bypassing paper altogether. “That saves them a lot of money,” Stewart says.

Reporting has been enhanced as well. Users can now right-click on grid lists of information and send that to Microsoft* Excel if they want to customize the sorting. And Excel opens automatically when that function is

performed, without users manually exporting that information to their desktops and leaving CONTROL to open it. “Drill-down capabilities have also been added to the application,” Osburn says.

Perfectly Tailored

After initial testing was phased in over the first three months of the year, CSS released the revamped version of CONTROL for general availability in May 2009, and most users have since adopted it.

Jostes says new employees don’t have to go through the rigorous training they had to in the past. The graphical interface is what everyone expects and they use it without hesitation. “We don’t have to double train people, first on what the application is and then how to use it,” he says. “Now, we just tell people how it works and away they go. Not only that, but we have all of this new functionality that’s grouped together in a very logical manner.”

Additionally, when members ask for new application enhancements, they can be easily implemented using RAMP.

“It’s incredible,” Jostes says. “When there’s an update, CSS simply pushes out that update to our server. Users simply log on and the update to their PC is automatic. This is very important for all of us, because many of the members don’t have their own IT departments. We, for example, have only one IT person. Throughout this process CSS takes care of everything by automatically updating the software.” □



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20 years.