



Legacy Databases Linked to Java-Based Applications As Insurer Moves to Application Server Model

Goal: Find a way to connect the various Java applications used by administration, sales, marketing and other departmental systems to disparate back-end databases.

Why they chose DataDirect: DataDirect SequeLink offered a simple solution for Northwestern Mutual's technology administration because it is one middleware solution from one vendor that works with its heterogeneous database environment.

Business benefits: A generic middleware solution supports systems today and can continue to serve the needs of the business as they implement future technology enhancements.

Technical benefits: SequeLink offers a flexible solution that easily integrates with different front- and back-end systems – a key consideration for a heterogeneous environment like Northwestern Mutual.

Companies with extensive applications and data structures in legacy systems have several challenges: keeping systems technologically current, enabling systems to accommodate growth and enhancements, and running systems at the lowest possible cost. These are the types of challenges that faced Northwestern Mutual as it evaluated its IT infrastructure.

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin mutual company is one of the major U.S.-based life insurance carriers. In addition to life insurance, the company and its subsidiaries provide annuities, mutual funds and long-term care and disability insurance. The company was an early adopter of mainframe computing, and those systems remain a part of Northwestern Mutual's technology infrastructure. The company's IT systems have evolved, and by the early 1990s, the company added client/server technology, using Sybase database applications for the majority of the company's client/server processing. As it added other applications, Northwestern Mutual implemented Oracle for a framework-based application and IBM's UDB DB2 for UNIX.

Addressing Heterogeneous DBMS Environment

Over time, the company's IT systems became "a heterogeneous, multiple DBMS environment," said John Hillmer, Northwestern Mutual's assistant director of database services. Initially, the company looked at technology that would connect applications to Sybase. However, realizing that the company's multiple databases required a way to link with multiple platforms, executives decided to look at universal solutions that would allow the technology infrastructure to use other systems in addition to Sybase. "We also needed a system that would allow us to continue to use the information in our legacy systems while taking advantage of advances in front-end technology," said Hillmer.

As it explored its options, Northwestern Mutual's IT team began to look at DataDirect SequeLink middleware. Northwestern Mutual had already used SequeLink successfully to support a security application. In that instance, SequeLink's JDBC drivers enabled the company to connect its existing Java-based applications with a Sybase database. The security system now enables all of the company's 8,000 financial representatives to gain remote access to company systems while protecting the security and privacy of the information.

In addition to linking with Sybase, Northwestern Mutual also needed middleware to connect front- and back-end systems for several new applications:

- An Internet project using packaged applications and Java programs with UDB DB2 provides financial network personnel with access to Internet home pages.
- A Java-based contract administration application that manages universal life insurance provides JDBC connectivity to Oracle.
- A customer service Internet application provides JDBC connectivity to its data.
- Multiple remote IBM WebSphere applications access and integrate information from Sybase and UDB DB2 databases.

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For more information, go to:
www.datadirect.com

For more information on Northwestern Mutual, go to:
www.northwesternmutual.com

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“In all, we had about 10 different applications with similar middleware needs,” said Hillmer.

Two key areas were accessing Oracle and UDB databases. “We needed to increase access to our Oracle data,” explained Hillmer. The company also needed direct connectivity to UDB. “UDB was originally brought in for a couple of purchased applications. As we continued to broaden the use of those applications, we realized that some of our external applications needed access to that data,” said Hillmer. “Rather than using a point DBMS solution, we decided to use a universal solution, generic middleware.”

Looking at its need for a flexible solution that could easily connect the different front- and back-end systems, and looking at its previous success, Northwestern Mutual again selected DataDirect SequeLink.

The software’s Java capabilities were a key factor in its selection. “As we retool some of the applications that we provide to our field sales force, we’re purchasing solutions and also building solutions. Those will be using newer technologies that require Java,” said Hillmer. “Our generic solution for going from Java to back-end databases in the client/server environment is to use SequeLink.”

Today, the DataDirect middleware connects “a pretty good mix” of different applications across the enterprise, from service, marketing, administration and other areas within the company. Applications supporting their home office, the Internet, and their financial network, for sales and service, all need access to back-end information, Hillmer said. “Each one of these areas—such as service or marketing—needed better ways of accessing the databases than they previously had.”