

Soft Cell

A Progress® OpenEdge™ 10 Case Study

Problem

In rearchitecting their suite of enterprise financial and business process solutions,

Soft Cell wanted to give customers working in various environments (Microsoft, Oracle, etc.) the flexibility to integrate tightly with best-of-breed technologies while retaining the stability and performance of the OpenEdge™ engine.

Decision

Create layered solutions that build upon the reliability of the Progress backbone that Soft Cell has used successfully for more than 16 years. Provide customers with the lowest cost of ownership by building solutions that feature high reliability, top performance, unrivaled TCO, and greater flexibility through “self-service” options for customization and expansion.

Solution

Use OpenEdge™ 10 to dramatically enhance their solution's interoperability and integration into Windows environments. Provide extensive training to their development team in order to ensure they make the most of OpenEdge 10 and the OpenEdge Reference Architecture.

Result

Soft Cell is going to market with the most “open” solution they've ever released. They are able to promise a level of performance and interoperability that has their sales team very motivated. Their universe of potential customers has dramatically expanded and they are confident that their new release will have a strong future.



Soft Cell develops and markets business solutions that allow mid-sized companies to optimize their financial, procurement, and operational processes for international enterprises. They are one of the first business solution providers in the European Union to help mid-sized organizations fully exploit .NET technology.

The primary value that Soft Cell emphasizes in developing their solutions is the long-term business knowledge the company brings to financial and business process applications. Strategically, then, it made perfect sense for the company to look to expand its base of customers able to take advantage of this domain expertise.

One attractive new market for Soft Cell existed in what they referred to as the “embedded market space” – where Soft Cell technology would provide a core background to mid-sized enterprises who were actually building their own customized applications. And in this market, “openness” was obviously critical to success.

“Continuity is also important to our customers”

For the past 16 years, Soft Cell has been a premier Progress Partner. They – and their advisory board made up of key customers – always counted the Progress platform's stability as a major competitive advantage in building solutions with a future. In assessing OpenEdge™ 10, they were glad to find the same stability.

“If you compare Progress with other companies, you'll find that with a major release, you have to wait until it stabilizes before you can really use it,” said Hans Jansen, Chief

Soft Cell is relying on several Progress technologies to move them ahead and the ability to execute integration-ready applications efficiently – in a unified environment – has helped them achieve aggressive goals, both in functionality of their solutions and in their time to market. The comprehensive, standards-based nature of the OpenEdge platform helps bring everything together.

Technology Officer of Soft Cell. “We did not find that with OpenEdge 10. When we looked at the first release of OpenEdge 10, we were pleasantly surprised that there were virtually no problems with it, especially considering how much had changed.”

Soft Cell’s customers have been very loyal, relying on the company to stay abreast of developing technology and to deliver it to them in ways they could take advantage of. Virtually all Soft Cell’s customers were Windows users and many were interested in ways to incorporate the familiar environment into other areas of their enterprises. Soft Cell took a hard look at the implications of that for their front-end interfaces.

“We decided to go with Microsoft .NET for the client side of our solutions,” explained Jansen. “.NET offered the advantage of tying-in with the Windows environment and allowed us a lot of flexibility in creating interfaces with a high degree of visual impact. Although we recognized that there would be a steep learning curve for our people, we felt that the extra effort on the part of our development organization would ultimately be worth it in the long run.”

An emphasis on process and training helps create a better solution – more efficiently

In addition to its headquarters in Antwerp, Soft Cell maintains a large development group in the Czech Republic. To keep everyone productive and coordinated, Soft Cell maintains a strong focus on the development process itself and makes a heavy investment in training.

“Training is always an issue when you change technologies,” Jansen explained. “The OpenEdge Reference Architecture provides a totally new approach to designing and building applications, so we spent a lot of time helping people understand the implications for their specific piece of the puzzle – the Progress side, the .NET side, the integration side, the UI side, and so forth.

“Fortunately, Soft Cell has traditionally been an early adopter of new technology, so we are very experienced in how to go about preparing for a change like this,” Jansen continued. “We looked at the early beta releases of OpenEdge 10 to help prepare our people in advance to understand the necessary changes that would affect their particular tasks in the process.”

In finance, success is in the details

Soft Cell is determined to stay on the leading edge in launching new applications and a careful analysis was made before deciding to link the company’s future with OpenEdge 10. In the end, the platform proved to have all “the right stuff” – and the relationship with Progress Software gave Soft Cell a high level of comfort and confidence in “future-proofing” its solutions.

“OpenEdge 10 is central to delivering our new capabilities to new markets,” Jansen said. “Our goal is to reach new customers with our latest application – and then to migrate our existing customers as they prepare to modernize and upgrade their functionality.”

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“First of all, of course, is the core – the 4GL and the database engine which is part of our development and deployment environment.” Jansen said. “We have the OpenEdge Application Server since we have an n-tier architecture. Complete business logic is running on the Application Server which can be deployed on multiple servers. We use Crystal Reports as an engine for our reporting architecture. And we use the complete Sonic architecture to message to the outside world and to integrate with workflow.”

As more of Soft Cell’s customers move to extended-enterprise models, Web-based connectivity has become a much more critical issue. “Web services are a very important part of our application, so the C# (.NET) Open Client is also part of our deployment and implementation strategy,” Jansen explained. “If we talk about ProDataSets, the speed they are handled in the OpenEdge Reference Architecture, and the way they can be exposed with the Open Client – with the C# implementation extending this possibility to the .NET environment – it’s clear that OpenEdge 10 is a very good fit for us.”

A wise investment for a future that’s moving closer every day

The typical Soft Cell customer has been using the product for several years, and long-term relationships are how the company prefers to do business. From this perspective, the mission-critical applications Soft Cell installs must perform over the long haul with a database foundation that’s rock solid.

At the same time, the pace of change, especially in the expanding European Union, demands that Soft Cell’s customers and their ERP and financial systems be very adaptable.

Where previously business requirements changed very gradually, today’s companies can expect a much more accelerated rate of adaptations, expansions, and modernizations.

“If you look at our design goals, one of the most important was to make sure the application was readily adaptable by the end user over the lifecycle of the application. Customers need to be able to easily change their business system as they move forward and their business requirements change,” Jansen said.

Another important consideration for Soft Cell’s customers – everyone’s customers, really – is total cost of ownership – another area where OpenEdge 10 helps Soft Cell excel. “One of the things we did was make sure the customer could change the conditions in which the system works, the processes that run through the system, and the experience of the things he needs to do to integrate with the outside world,” Jansen explained. “For example, within the limitations of his or her role in the company, the user interface can be completely redesigned by the end user, enormously reducing the cost of ownership since no one has to intervene to execute the changes. Over the course of our application’s lifecycle – say five to six years – this is a major cost savings.”

With the launch of the new application well underway, Soft Cell is looking forward to continuing its collaboration with Progress, and Jansen feels confident about an open future. “For us, OpenEdge10 is an important first step in an absolutely correct direction. I am looking forward to what OpenEdge Release 10.1 will give us and how that will help Soft Cell extend our application and our business even further.”

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About Soft Cell

Founded in 1981, the Soft Cell group has grown into a leading supplier of enterprise-wide software solutions and services for the management and control of financial, procurement and project processes.

The company today has more than 250 customers throughout Western and Eastern Europe, and installations in the United States, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Worldwide more than 1200 administrations are using Soft Cell's ERP and e-business solutions. The company's headquarters are in Antwerp, Belgium. In addition, Soft Cell has offices in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. The Soft Cell group numbers about 100 employees.

For further information, please have a look at www.softcell.be, www.softcell.nl, or www.softcell.cz.

About Progress Software

Progress simplifies the development, deployment, integration, and management of the world's best business applications. Progress and its 2,000 global Application Partners offer more than 5,000 Progress-based business applications that precisely fit customer needs and deliver competitive advantage. Customers purchase more than \$5 billion annually in cost-effective software and services from Progress and its partners.

Progress' OpenEdge platform enables its partners to deliver lowest cost-of-ownership applications that are rapidly implemented and easily integrated within and across the extended enterprise. Progress Software Corporation (Nasdaq: PRGS) can be reached at www.progress.com.

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