Visible Advantage

AC Inc. Designs Enterprise Data Models with Visible Advantage

Reviewed by Philip D. Anglin, Senior Systems Analyst

BACKROUND: AC Information Technology, a division of AC Inc., is located in Huntsville, Alabama, and specializes in the design, implementation and hosting of Web-based applications and e-business solutions for both government and commercial clients. The Web development teams focus on designing systems that reflects the customer's business needs and use tools that can link business objectives to the data design. The implementation of these designs can be achieved by utilizing any of number of database platforms an application software tools that suit the client's best interest.

PLATFORMS: Visible Advantage from Visible Systems Corporation runs on Windows 95, 98 and NT.

PROBLEMS SOLVED: In September 1999, AC's Information Technology division completed a four-month Web development effort for the U.S. National Guard Counterdrug Directorate. This project involved the rehosting of the existing client/server information systems to a Web-based application server (Silver-Stream). The previous systems collected operational data in the field and allowed for data transfers into a data warehouse at the national headquarters. It was the need for retrieving and analyzing a variety of performance reporting systems that was integrated with the Web systems. The design of the performance reporting systems required that all information needed to measure the status of the organization's objectives and the value of support be identified and modeled. The new data requirements determined from this effort had to be integrated within the existing database structure of the information systems.

PRODUCT FUNCTIONALITY: Visible Advantage offers the ability to capture an unlimited amount of business planning documentation and easily allows the linking of these business conditions to every element in the data model. This feature, combined with the capability of merging the new enterprise model, insured that all business requirements (objectives) were being supported by data structure and that there were no duplicate instances of the same data in the model. The feature of establishing model views for any type of data subset allowed the developers to easily determine what data was unique to

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the reporting systems as well as what data would be shared with the other areas of the existing systems.

STRENGTHS: The primary strength of this product is the ability to design large enterprise data models which can be linked to the organization's business plans. This results in an exceptionally well-documented database design. Visible Advantage also provides for arranging this design in model views as determined by the designer and/or customer. This tool also will perform extensive analysis on the data model so that errors can be rapidly identified and corrected. Although not used on this project, Visible Advantage can generate XML files. We will be using this feature on an upcoming project.

WEAKNESSES: As with other design tools, Visible Advantage requires some training in order to fully maximize its capability. We recommend that if more than one designer is going to be working in the model (from different workstations) that the multi-user version be considered.

SELECTION CRITERIA: Our decision to use this tool for this project was based on these major factors: Visible Advantage has the ability to merge new models cleanly with existing models; it serves as an encyclopedia for all of the business objectives and their definitions, and provides a means to track all data elements back to these business events; and this tool provides the flexibility to set up multiple model views to support frequently changing scenarios and does not restrict implementation to any proprietary platform.

DELIVERABLES: The deliverables produced by Visible Advantage are superb. A wide range of reports can be generated to reflect every aspect of the model and supporting business documentation. The tool provides the ability to produce ready-to-publish documentation (with a table of contents) that can be custom built for any model view.

VENDOR SUPPORT: Our support from Visible Systems has been excellent. They provide expert consulting for training in the tools, data modeling/design and technical assistance.

DOCUMENTATION: Visible Advantage provides a very easy-to-understand user guide, and additional training is readily available.

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