



A Primer on Business Objects

Introduction

When software visionaries promote the benefits of distributed architectures the term “business object” is frequently used. Somewhere in their discourse any number of the following terms are used in every possible permutation: 3-tier, N-tier, software component, and ActiveX. The message, while inspiring, frequently provides a view equivalent to surveying the landscape at an elevation of 30,00 feet. Sorting out clear direction can be a perplexing and frustrating task.

This article is written for software practitioners who, having heard and accepted the message, now yearn for practical guidance on how to transform vision into reality, or more accurately, how to transform vision into code.

No claims for universal truth are made for the content of the following article. Instead, it offers practical guidance, sound principles, and useful examples of how to start building business objects today. The article is based on our experience and the resulting product **Visible Developer** that generates 3-tier business objects. For more information about **Low Code Development**, please visit our website at www.visible-systems.com.

Each section heading is phrased as a question about business objects. Sections are roughly sequenced from introductory to more advanced. Navigate the sections sequentially or jump into one that strikes you.

Where Are Business Objects In An N-Tier Application?

How Do Business Objects Make Reuse Easier?

How Do You Design Business Objects?

How Many Classes Are Needed To Create One Business Object?

How Do Classes Interact To Create A Business Object?

Where Are Business Objects In An N-Tier Application?

First, it is easier to say where the business object is not.

- It is not the user interface (UI) that is the top layer in the application.
- It is not the database services or the bottom layer of an application.

Business objects reside “in the middle” below the UI that creates the visual presentation and responds to the user’s actions and above the database services layer (i.e., DBMS) that manages the physical data structures. Sounds simple enough, but the definition does beg an answer to the question “What is a layer?”

In a layered application design, as shown in Figure 1, communication only occurs between adjacent layers and never skips a layer. For example, the UI communicates directly with the business object and never interacts with the database service layer while the business object, being in the middle, communicates with both the UI and the database services layer.

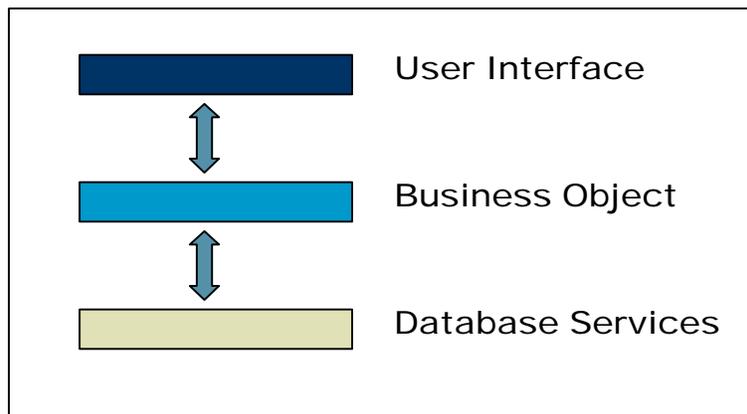


Figure 1. Application Design Layers

Layers within an application design are distinct from the layers or tiers present in the physical deployment of the application. Design layers are software interfaces, interfaces in the case of **Visible Developer**, that make it possible to distribute the application across different processors creating physical layers. An obvious, but seldom mentioned point is that design layers make distributed architectures possible.

Incorporating layers within an application’s design adds complexity and increases the amount of code. So why bother to do it? On the plus side, it provides deployment options enabling an application to scale from single user to enterprise-wide. The following figure shows how adjacent design layers can be packaged together and deployed on a processor.

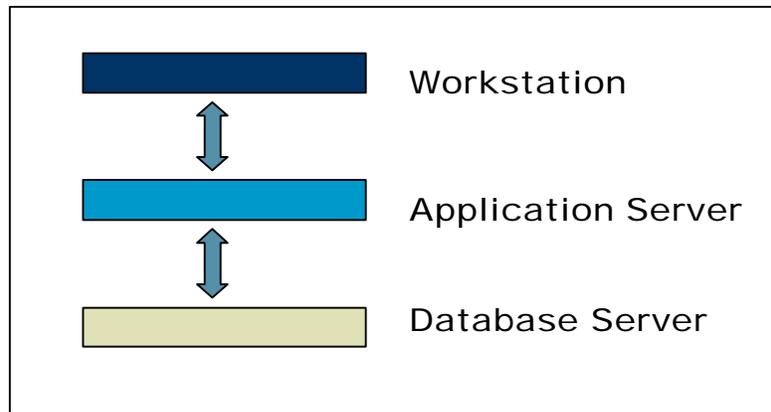


Figure 2. Physical Architecture Layers

In theory, more processors imply greater performance. In practice, however, distributing business applications, and hence business objects, across multiple processors is far more difficult and involved than implied by the graphics. Business objects designed for a two-tier architecture may perform poorly when moved to a 3-tier architecture.

What causes reality to fall short of theory? The largest impediment is the overhead caused by communication between layers residing on different processors. Techniques are available to reduce this overhead but they are best discussed in articles dedicated to this topic. The important point to be made is that a business object's design must anticipate communication across process boundaries and utilize one of the available techniques to minimize the performance impact. Later, when code samples are discussed, the techniques used in code generated by **Visible Developer** will be pointed out.

How Do Business Objects Make Reuse Easier?

Good software design promotes reuse. The old axiom “garbage in, garbage out” applies; poorly designed business objects will benefit marginally from technology.

Application of two proven software design principles is a good way to make reuse possible: coupling and cohesion. Coupling is a subjective measure of the degree to which two programs (modules, classes, procedures, etc.) are interdependent. Coupling is unavoidable because if two programs are to accomplish a task together there must be a minimum degree of coupling. The objective is to minimize the amount of coupling in an application.

Cohesion is measure of the “single mindedness” of a program. Programs that execute clearly defined tasks each having specified inputs and corresponding results are cohesive. High cohesion is good; low cohesion is bad.

Low coupling and high cohesion make maintenance easier because problems are easier to find and fix because they can be isolated. Reuse is easier because an identifiable unit of reuse is easier to find.

The object-oriented programming model, when used appropriately, reduces coupling and makes reuse easier because:

- Public methods define the tasks the business object performs and are visible expressions of the object's cohesion. A poorly constructed set of methods destroys cohesion.
- Properties selectively expose data to the outside world and hide internal information at the same time. When internal data is hidden, coupling is reduced because external objects cannot manipulate or access private data.

An example illustrates how cohesion and coupling appear in a design and how a business object constructed using a single database table called Purchase Order with the following fields:

- Number
- Customer Number
- Date_Received
- Status

In the first design a form, frmPODetail, contains a textbox control for each field. A data bound control is added to directly retrieve data from the table. The code behind the form is the only layer in the design. So, what's the problem? Consider the following sequence of events:

Requirement 1: Number is now created by concatenating a three-letter customer code with system-generated number.

Response: Code is added to frmPODetail to obtain the customer code and generate the Purchase Order Number.

Requirement 2: A request is made for a new form containing a grid control so business users can easily work with multiple purchase orders.

Response: A new form, frmPOGrid is created. The code that was added to frmPODetail to obtain the customer code and generate the Purchase Order Number is also added to this form.

A simple business rule stating how purchase order numbers are formed now appears in the code behind two forms. Maintenance effort is doubled and the probability of a bug is increased. The diagnosis is low cohesion and high coupling. Cohesion is low because the code in the forms has two very different responsibilities:

- Present data to the user and react to the user's actions.
- Enforce business rules.

The most egregious form of coupling is the data bound control, but more about that later. The solution is to create layers in the software design and separate responsibilities among the layers. The two forms will be in one layer and a second layer will contain a class, `PurchaseOrder`, responsible for validating and, in the case of `Number`, generating field values.

Is the problem resolved? Are two design layers enough? Probably not because there is still a high degree of coupling between the data bound controls in the forms and the underlying database structure. Changes to the `Purchase Order` table would likely require changes to both the grid and detail forms.

A better solution is to remove knowledge of physical data storage (the name of the database, table, columns, etc.) from the UI and move it to a single piece of code. One possible location is the business object created in the prior step. Another possibility is to add another layer responsible for database access. The later design option is the approach taken by **Visible Developer**, and it is discussed in more detail in later sections.

The potential for reuse is achieved only if the business object's design exhibits high cohesion and low coupling. This naturally leads to the next question.

How Do You Design Business Objects?

The art in business object design, and what very few articles or books mention, is how to decide what information and tasks should go into each layer of the design. The following principles guide the design decisions embodied in code generated by **Visible Developer**.

- Keep the UI simple. A good design principle is to think of the UI as wallpaper; it is the thin visual covering provided for the structural portion of the application. UIs change due to new technology, user requirements and, just like wallpaper, taste.
- Don't allow the business object to make assumptions about the UI. Ideally, business objects should be "UI agnostic" – they don't know of their existence and it doesn't really matter anyway.
- Keep information local to each layer and only share information through properties and methods. The design maxim for each layer is "Everything it needs to know, but nothing else."
- Think of the business object as a provider of services to the UI. It is the responsibility of the UI to make use of these services to create the interaction with the user. A robust UI might take advantage of a business object's event to enable the update button on the form. A simpler UI, an Excel spreadsheet for example, might choose to ignore events offered by the business object and limit the interaction to a read-only list of information. If a business object is designed properly, very different UIs can reuse its services.
- To be reusable, business objects must expose their essence via the methods, properties, and events offered. Keep in mind that they will be implemented as an ActiveX dll or exe, so a potential user's knowledge about a business object is

limited to the kind of information provided by the object browser. A daunting challenge, isn't it?

Visible Developer applies the above design principles when generating business objects resulting in three distinct design layers plus the database services:

- User Interface
- Logical Business Object
- Physical Business Object
- Database Services (DBMS)

The User Interface

The visual presentation of information to the business user and responding to user actions is the responsibility of the UI. The only requirement made of the UI is it must be able to create and use objects. This provides a great deal of flexibility for both application developers and business users. Formal and robust UIs can be written using languages like ASP, C#, Java, Python, etc. At the same time an expert user can access information contained in business objects through a familiar spreadsheet application.

The Logical Business Object

The logical business object is directly below the UI in the application design. It encapsulates data, business operations and rules governing adding, changing, or removing its data. Logical business objects present information and business operations from the business user's perspective.

Logical business objects do not directly access the underlying database. Instead, they use services provided by the physical business object to read, update, and delete business data.

The Physical Business Object

Physical business objects tend to be much simpler than their logical counterparts. Their responsibility is limited to communicating with the database services layer in response to a request from the logical business object. Physical business objects are aware of the database structure and are responsible for translating the logical business object's request into one or more transactions in the database services layer.

Database Services

The database services layer is typically a relational database management system (DBMS).

Separating Information and Responsibilities among Design Layers

The leap from concept to implementation requires hard choices and involves many details. Figure 3 describes the design of each layer in a **Visible Developer** application by stating the responsibility of each layer and the information it does or does not possess. Design

decisions reflect the principles listed previously with the goals of making each layer cohesive and reducing coupling between layers.

Design Layer	Responsibilities	What It Knows	What It Doesn't Know
1. User Interface	Present business data to the user Respond to actions taken by the user Display error messages	GUI Controls Properties and methods of business objects it uses	Validation rules for properties Business rules Where business data is stored
2. Logical Business Object	Provide services to the UI Enforce business and validation rules Request data services from Physical Business Object	Business rules and validation rules Services provided by the physical business object	The forms and GUI controls displaying its data Where business data is stored
3. Physical Business Object	Respond to requests for data services made by the Logical Business Object Obtain data services from the DBMS	The database containing business information How to request data services from the DBMS	Business rules and validation rules
4. Data Services (DBMS)	Retrieve data from physical storage Change data in physical storage	SQL.NOSQL and/or JDBC /ODBC	Everything else!

Figure 4. Overview of Design

The next step is to translate this design into forms, standard modules, and classes.

How Many Classes Are Needed To Create A Business Object?

A layer in the application design does not necessarily equate to a single class. It is often useful to implement a layer in the design using more than one class or standard module.

Our concept of a business object grows more complicated. Originally it was described as a software design layer somewhere between the UI and database services. In the previous section, the business object was split into two layers: a logical and physical. And finally, each of these layers contains several components. So a business object is not a single “thing;” in reality, it is a collection of collaborating parts each having a precisely defined role.

Visible Developer generates four classes for each business object; three classes are contained in Layer 2, the logical business object, and one class is contained in Layer 3, the physical business object or persistence layer.

A naming convention is used to easily identify the particular business object class and suggest its purpose. In the following example, the class names appear as they would be generated for a PurchaseOrder business object.

Classes contained in Layer 2 are:

- PurchaseOrder: The primary object used by the UI. It contains the business object’s properties, methods, and business rules. It acts as an intermediary between the UI, Layer 1, and Layer 3. PurchaseOrder uses its counterpart Layer 3 class, PurchaseOrderPersist, to access and change data in the database.
- PurchaseOrderList: A specialized class used when the UI needs a list of information about one or more business objects. To the UI, the PurchaseOrderList behaves like a recordset with each row containing property values of a single business object.
- PurchaseOrderBatch: Another specialized class used to collect business operations (add, update, delete, etc.) in Layer 2 and transmit them in batch to Layer 3.

The Layer 3 class is:

- PurchaseOrderPersist: The Layer 3 counterpart to the PurchaseOrder and PurchaseOrderList classes. It carries out database operations on their behalf.

The distribution of classes among design layers is shown in Figure 5.

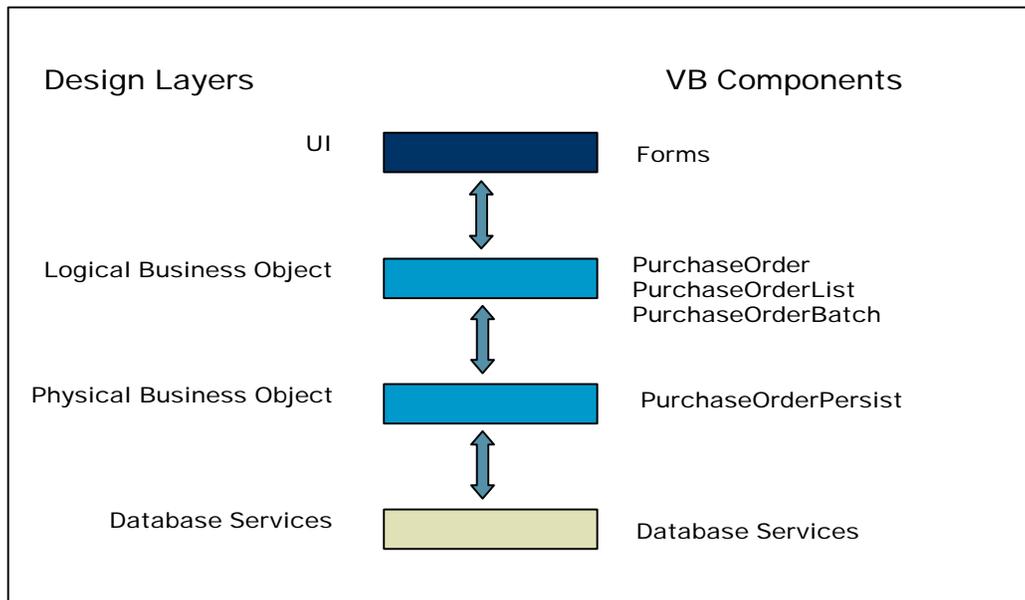


Figure 5. Components and Design Layers

The final section addresses the obvious question: How does all of this work?

How Do Classes Interact To Create A Business Object?

Working with Business Objects in Visible Developer



Let's use as an example two tables from a simple database: Purchase Order and Customer. Visible Developer automatically extracts information from the database schema and creates a business object from each table. Table fields are included as object properties and four default methods: add, delete, read, and update are created. The relationship between Customer and Purchase Order is also created. **Visible Developer** uses foreign key information when generating code.

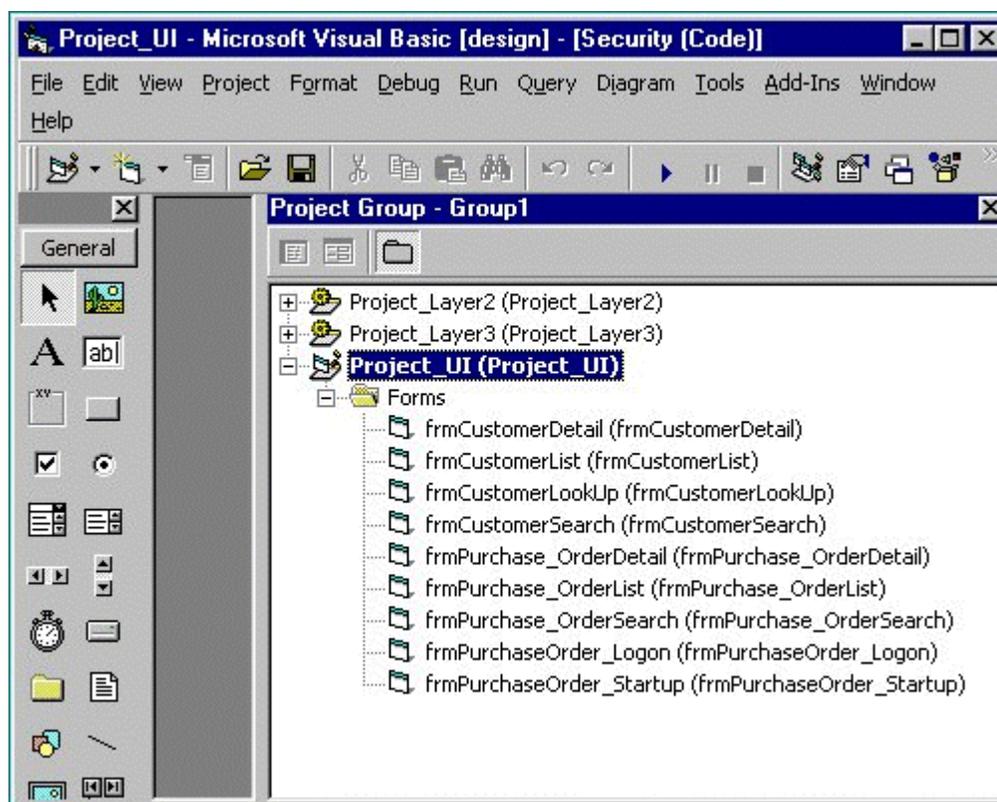
Developers can add design information to make the generated code as close as possible to the desired result. For example, developers can select a control type (text box, combo box, option buttons, etc.), list permitted property values, and add more methods.

Visible Developer offers developers a number of code generation options including the ability to generate three styles of forms: List, Detail and Lookup. Generated components include class modules, standard modules, and forms with controls and code. **Visible Developer** packages generated components in 1, 2 or 3 projects depending on the selected generation option. Each project results in a standard executable or an ActiveX dll or exe.

Layer 1: The User Interface

After code generation is complete, **Visible Developer** is closed and the developer continues working on each layer which in the generated application appears as a project.

Components in the first layer are contained in Project_UI. A total of nine forms were generated. Two forms, frmPurchaseOrder_Logon and frmPurchaseOrder_Startup, are standard forms that are always generated. Each button on the startup form corresponds to a generated business object. Clicking the button displays a list form for that object. In this example, the list forms are frmPurchase_OrderList and frmCustomerList.

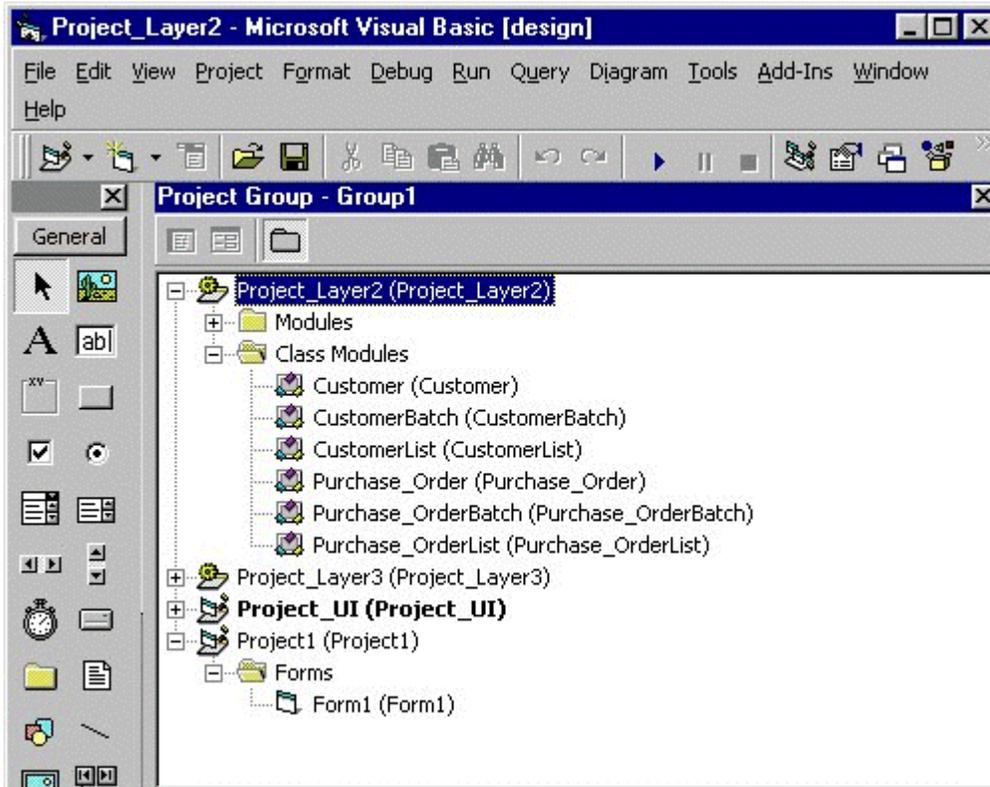


Contents of Layer 1 Project

List forms and their associated search forms display business object property values in a tree view control. After a particular customer or purchase order is selected, it can be deleted or changed using a detail form. The detail forms, frmPurchase_Order detail and frmCustomerDetail, display property values of a single business object and enable the business user to create, delete, or update using the same form.

Layer 2: The Logical Business Object

The second project, Project_Layer2, contains the class modules that constitute the logical customer and purchase order business objects. **Visible Developer** creates three classes for each business object in Layer 2 of the application: BusinessObject, BusinessObjectList, and BusinessObjectBatch. A brief description of each class and how it is used is provided in a previous section.



Contents of Layer 2 Project

Layer 3: The Physical Business Object

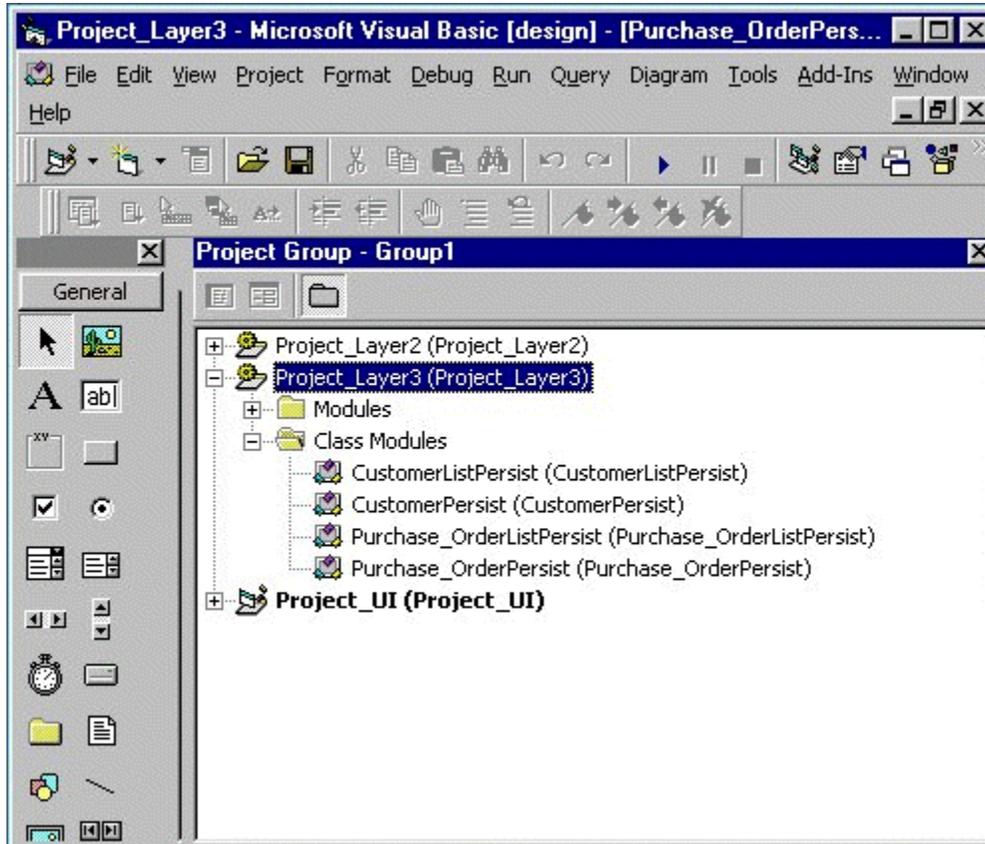
Project_Layer3 contains components generated for Layer 3. The classes generated by **Visible Developer** for layer 3 correspond to classes in Layer 2 and the methods for related classes are nearly identical. For example, the Purchase_Order class has an Add method typically invoked by a form as follows:

```
myPurchase_Order.Add
```

Logical classes do not perform database actions. Instead, they rely upon their Layer 3 counterpart, the “persistence classes,” to carry out these tasks. Continuing the example, the Purchase_Order object has the following statement in its Add method:

```
myPurchase_OrderPersist.Add
```

The Purchase_Order class contains business rules and is responsible for knowing if the object is in a correct state to be added. For example, it would contain a business rule, which is implemented as a private sub, to ensure all mandatory properties have valid values before attempting to add.



Contents of Layer 3 Project

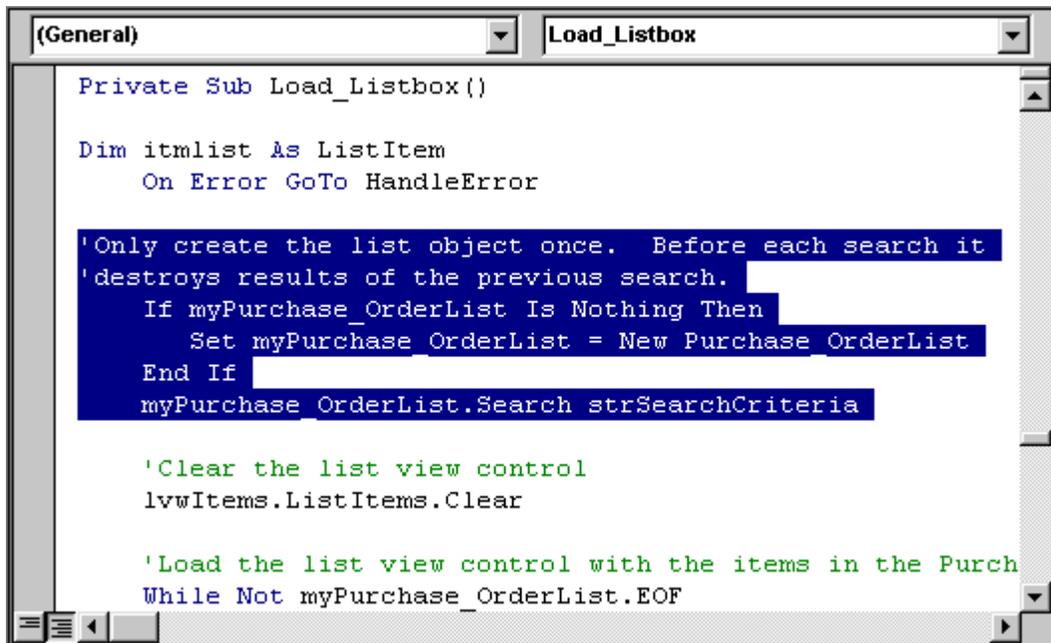
The remaining sections use extracts from the generated code to demonstrate the flow of data and methods between the layers.

Sample Code: Searching and Displaying Purchase Orders

The first execution path begins with code in the frmPurchase_OrderList form. The sequence is:

1. Layer 1: List form uses the Search method of Purchase_OrderList to find objects matching the search criteria.
2. Layer 2: Purchase_OrderList object uses the Search method of Purchase_OrderPersist to search the database.
3. Layer 3: Purchase_OrderPersist creates an ADO Recordset containing property values of matching purchase orders and returns it to Layer 2.

Layer 1: Purchase Order List Form: Loading Listbox



```
(General) Load_Listbox
Private Sub Load_Listbox()
    Dim itmList As ListItem
    On Error GoTo HandleError

    'Only create the list object once. Before each search it
    'destroys results of the previous search.
    If myPurchase_OrderList Is Nothing Then
        Set myPurchase_OrderList = New Purchase_OrderList
    End If
    myPurchase_OrderList.Search strSearchCriteria

    'Clear the list view control
    lvwItems.ListItems.Clear

    'Load the list view control with the items in the Purch
    While Not myPurchase_OrderList.EOF
```

Layer 1 objects, typically forms, create Layer 2 logical objects to perform tasks. A UI designer uses a list object, like `Purchase_OrderList`, as a convenient utility object to perform searches and make the results easily accessible. The UI's knowledge of the business object is limited to the names of properties and its only responsibility in this example is to create a string containing expressions of the form "Number > 100 And Received_Date < 12/12/2018". The UI, or form, does not need to know:

- The name of the table or tables providing property values.
- The names of the columns in a table that corresponds to these properties.
- How to make a database connection or even what database (or databases) contain purchase orders.
- That the `Purchase_OrderList` object will use another object to actually query the database

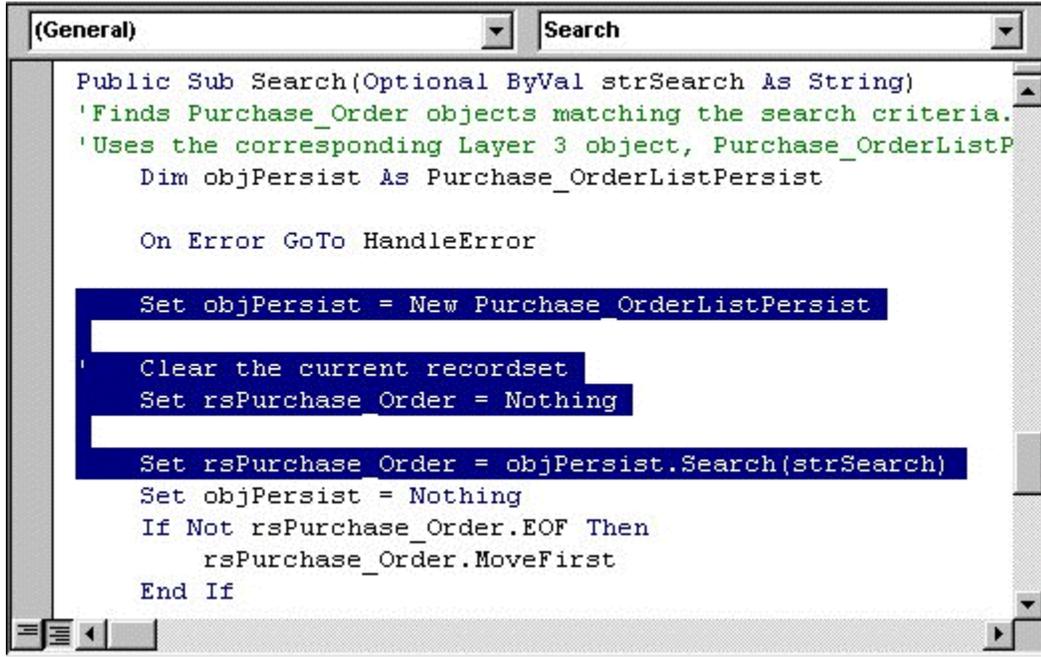
Moving this knowledge to other layers in the design strengthens the cohesion of the UI and reduces coupling within the application.

The highlighted statement in the above example,

```
myPurchase_OrderList.Search strSearchCriteria
```

leads to the next piece of sample code.

Layer 2: Purchase_OrderList Object: Search Method



```
(General) Search
Public Sub Search(Optional ByVal strSearch As String)
'Finds Purchase_Order objects matching the search criteria.
'Uses the corresponding Layer 3 object, Purchase_OrderListP
  Dim objPersist As Purchase_OrderListPersist

  On Error GoTo HandleError

  Set objPersist = New Purchase_OrderListPersist

  Clear the current recordset
  Set rsPurchase_Order = Nothing

  Set rsPurchase_Order = objPersist.Search(strSearch)
  Set objPersist = Nothing
  If Not rsPurchase_Order.EOF Then
    rsPurchase_Order.MoveFirst
  End If
```

Objects in Layer 2, or logical objects, do not directly access persistent data. As shown in this code sample, the Purchase_OrderList object creates a Purchase_OrderPersist object and uses its Search method to obtain purchase orders matching the criteria.

Purchase_OrderList might appear to be a useless middleman in this transaction but in fact provides valuable services to the UI. It maintains matching purchase orders obtained from Layer 3 internally in an ADOR recordset and exposes many of the recordset's methods and properties to the UI. This enables a UI developer to use the Purchase_OrderList object as if it were a recordset; a familiar construct to many programmers.

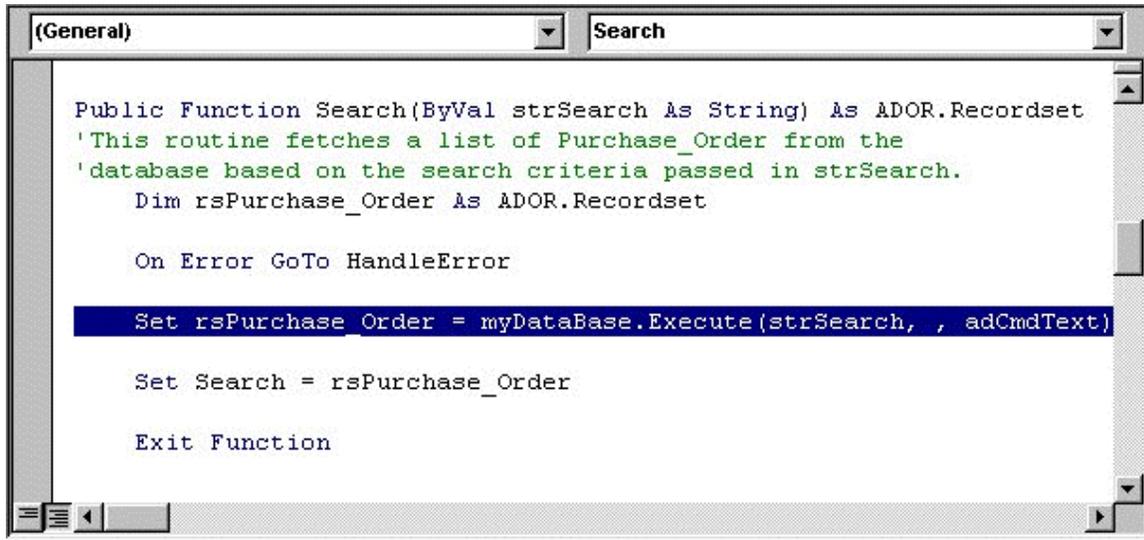
The Purchase_OrderList object enables the UI developer to avoid the cost associated with creating purchase order business objects for each row by retaining the values internally as a recordset. If a business user requests to work with a particular purchase order displayed in the listview, the UI developer creates the corresponding Purchase_Order object.

The highlighted statement in the above example,

```
Set rsPurchase_Order = objPersist.Search(strSearch)
```

leads to the next piece of sample code.

Layer 3: PurchaseOrderPersist Object: Search Method



```
(General) Search
Public Function Search(ByVal strSearch As String) As ADOR.Recordset
    'This routine fetches a list of Purchase_Order from the
    'database based on the search criteria passed in strSearch.
    Dim rsPurchase_Order As ADOR.Recordset

    On Error GoTo HandleError

    Set rsPurchase_Order = myDataBase.Execute(strSearch, , adCmdText)

    Set Search = rsPurchase_Order

    Exit Function
```

The Layer 3 object, Purchase_OrderPersist, understands how to translate between the logical view of the object’s properties and the underlying physical view consisting of database tables and columns. This layer is responsible for making the database connection (not shown in the sample code), converting property names to column names (also not shown), creating ADO recordsets. Etc.

After the Search method of the Purchase_OrderPersist object is finished, control passes back to the Purchase_Order object in Layer 2 and from there back to the UI in Layer 1.

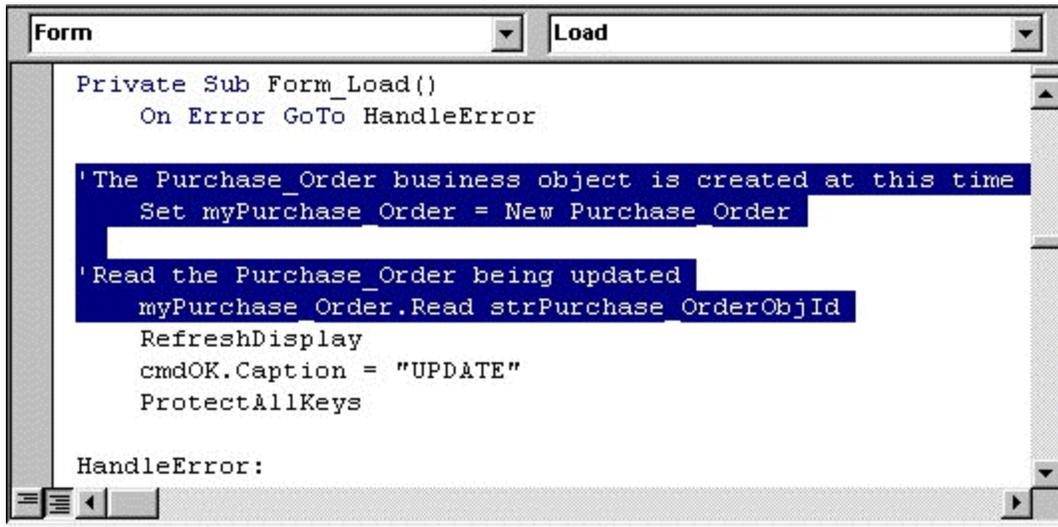
Sample Code: Changing A Property Value

The second sample code execution path begins with the frmPurchase_OrderDetail form. The sequence is:

1. Layer 1: The Detail form uses the Read method of Purchase_Order to load a specific purchase order.
2. Layer 1: The Detail form responds to a change to a purchase order number.
3. Layer 2: The Purchase_Order object validates the new number.

A detail form always creates a Purchase_Order object when it is first loaded. The next step depends upon the action taken. If a new purchase order is to be created, the UI displays the form after the Purchase_Order object is created; essentially leaving it in an “empty” state. When updating or deleting a purchase order, the UI uses the Read method to retrieve values from the existing purchase order.

Layer 1: Creating and Loading A Purchase_Order Business Object



```
Form Load
Private Sub Form_Load()
    On Error GoTo HandleError

    'The Purchase_Order business object is created at this time
    Set myPurchase_Order = New Purchase_Order

    'Read the Purchase_Order being updated
    myPurchase_Order.Read strPurchase_OrderObjId
    RefreshDisplay
    cmdOK.Caption = "UPDATE"
    ProtectAllKeys

HandleError:
```

The highlighted statement:

```
myPurchaseOrder.Read strPurchase_OrderObjId
```

loads the current property values of the purchase order identified by `strPurchase_OrderObjId` from the database. To accomplish this task, the `Read` method of the `Purchase_Order` object (Layer 2) creates a `Purchase_OrderPersist` object (Layer 3) and invokes its `Read` method. The movement between Layer 2 and Layer 3 is similar to the previous example so it is not shown.

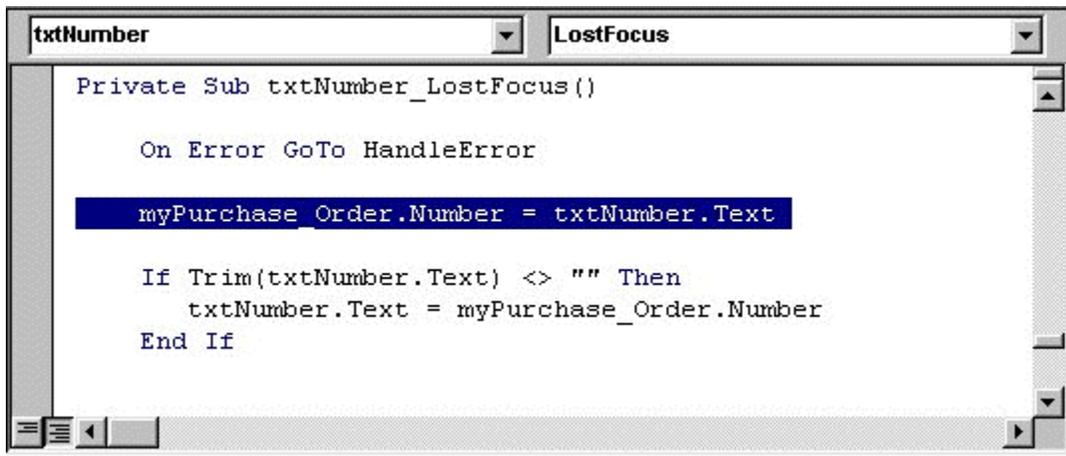
After the `Read` method of `myPurchase_Order` object is finished, the UI obtains the value of each property using the `RefreshDisplay` sub. It contains statements of the form:

```
txtNumber.Text = myPurchase_Order.Number
```

The first step in this example concludes with the form displayed and the business user ready to make changes.

The second step in the sample demonstrates how the UI uses the services of the business object to validate and store property values. In the example the detail form has a textbox, `txtNumber`, that displays the value of the `Purchase_Order`'s `Number` property. Whenever the business user tabs through the `txtNumber` textbox, the UI sets the business object's corresponding property value to the control's value. And that is all it does.

Layer 1: Purchase Order Detail Form: Lost Focus Event



```
txtNumber LostFocus
Private Sub txtNumber_LostFocus()
    On Error GoTo HandleError
    myPurchase_Order.Number = txtNumber.Text
    If Trim(txtNumber.Text) <> "" Then
        txtNumber.Text = myPurchase_Order.Number
    End If
End Sub
```

It is important to emphasize what the UI does not do when using business objects:

- It does not check to see if the characters entered represent a number.
- It does not test to see if the business user is permitted to change a value already entered.
- It does not test to see if a Number is mandatory.
- It does not cross check the Number entered with other values.
- And so on....

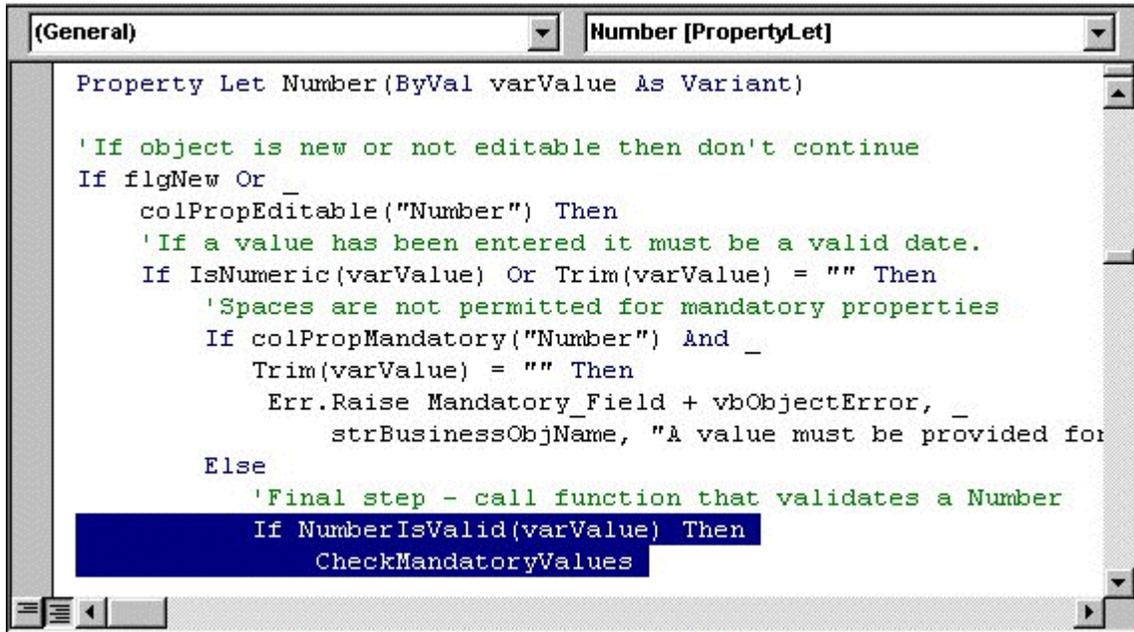
To sum it up, the UI only reports values to the business object. It does not attempt to interpret them. If a business object discovers an error, it raises an event and it is the UI's job to respond to the event appropriately.

The final lines of code in the sample seem contradictory at first glance. Why does the UI obtain the Number property from myPurchase_Order when it just sent the value to the object in the previous statement? The reason is the strict line of responsibility drawn between the UI and the logical business object. UI's display property values and business objects supply property values. The UI asks the business object for the value of the Number property in case the value originally provided by the UI was reformatted by the business object. Perhaps reformatting purchase order numbers seems unlikely, but consider SSNs. Should every control displaying an SSN have code to put the dashes in the right place, or is it a better design to make formatting an SSN the responsibility on a single business object?

The final step in this example shows code from the Property Let sub in the Purchase_Order business object. The code should look familiar to programmers. It is similar to statements previously contained in a form. The

responsibilities, and hence the code, for data validation is removed from the UI and placed with the business object. Encapsulating logic within the business object makes it available for reuse by any UIs, forms, web browser, Excel spreadsheet, etc., that uses the business object.

Layer 2: PurchaseOrder Object: Property Let



```
(General) Number [PropertyLet]
Property Let Number(ByVal varValue As Variant)
'If object is new or not editable then don't continue
If flgNew Or _
    colPropEditable("Number") Then
    'If a value has been entered it must be a valid date.
    If IsNumeric(varValue) Or Trim(varValue) = "" Then
        'Spaces are not permitted for mandatory properties
        If colPropMandatory("Number") And _
            Trim(varValue) = "" Then
            Err.Raise Mandatory_Field + vbObjectError, _
                strBusinessObjName, "A value must be provided for
        Else
            'Final step - call function that validates a Number
            If NumberIsValid(varValue) Then
                CheckMandatoryValues
```

The highlighted code in the sample demonstrates how business rules are incorporated. After a value passes all initial checks, the business object calls all business rules, which are private Subs, possibly affected by a change in the property's value. CheckMandatoryValues is called in the sample because Number is a required field and the business rule governing mandatory properties applies to it.