

Railway Furnishers

AcuToWeb supports rapid modernization, providing agile decision making and a clear digital future.

Who is Railway Furnishers?

Railway Furnishers consists of two main businesses: one is a furniture and appliance retail outlet, operating through 30 stores and supported by 450 employees, while the other is a branded clothing business, with 13 stores and 100 employees. Railway Furnishers is the only furniture and appliance retailer in South Africa to offer customers the opportunity to pay off their purchase over a period of time without additional charges.

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ANNETTE VILJOEN

Group Chief Technology Officer
Railway Furnishers

Railway Furnishers Grinds to a Halt When COVID-19 Hits

Railway Furnishers heavily relies on COBOL to run its business. Each month over 550,000 transactions are processed through COBOL backend systems, all driven by in-store purchases. Annette Viljoen, Group Chief Technology Officer for Railway Furnishers, already knew that the future would lie in improving digital capabilities, alongside the successful store model. However, when COVID-19 hit in March 2020, those ideas had to be put into practice immediately, as she explains: "All 43 Railway Furnishings stores closed, and our employees were on 'stay at home' orders. Our customers could not pay their accounts in any other way. We had to be smart, and we had to be fast."

In accelerated fashion, the team identified the gaps between the task at hand and the capabilities of the current systems. They considered the software's real-time capabilities, processing speed, and the ability to support different platforms such as mobile, as well as application integration. Railway Furnishers was founded over 60 years ago: when systems are introduced over such a long time span, there are often issues with lack of documentation, inconsistent coding, and applications depending on outdated frameworks, libraries, or technologies. It can be tempting to rebuild the system



At a Glance

■ Industry

Retail

■ Location

South Africa

■ Challenge

Accelerate online retail by rapidly modernizing 'bricks & mortar' high street model to enable modern digital retail channels

■ Products and Services

AcuToWeb

■ Success Highlights

- + Successful introduction of online payment gateways within a week
- + AcuToWeb instantly modernizes application UI to HTML for easy web access
- + Single code base for Unix, Linux, Windows, web, and mobile platforms
- + Enhanced encryption for URL generation to ensure secure transactions
- + Agile reporting & decision making within modern environment

"Incredibly, with AcuToWeb we were up and running again within just a week, having introduced two payment gateways so that our customers could settle their accounts safely online and from the comfort of their homes."

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altogether. However, this requires a huge up-front investment and a major resource commitment. It is not an undertaking that can be done quickly.

Instant UI Modernization with AcuToWeb

"We didn't want to start from scratch," says Annette. "We have so much intellectual property built into our existing systems, and because we based it all on COBOL, we had the option to use the Micro Focus (now part of OpenText™) **extend** portfolio. This enables businesses to reuse their core application investments built on ACUCOBOL technology, exactly like ours are. We used Micro Focus (now part of OpenText™) AcuToWeb for an instant UI modernization of our ACUCOBOL applications, enabling web access with a modern HTML experience. Cascading style sheets paved the way to ensure consistency throughout the system. We were able to manage a single code base for Unix, Linux, Windows, web, and our mobile platforms. This AcuToWeb functionality was a deciding factor for us."

Pre-2020, no Railway Furnishers customer paid their account via electronic funds transfer (EFT) or through payment gateways, so everything was done in-store. Leveraging the **extend** portfolio and OpenText™ AcuToWeb, the team enjoyed a rapid upgrade path which required no code changes for most applications using standard controls. Even character-based applications can be accessed using a web browser, as AcuToWeb provides support

for leading web server platforms and an out-of-the-box web server environment. Taking key business applications online always carries security concerns, and the team was pleased with the AcuToWeb enhanced encryption for URL generation to ensure secure transactions.

Agile Decision Making and a Bright Digital Future

Next, Annette and her team fully integrated an in-house COBOL stock system, the point of sale (POS) system to generate receipts and invoices at the backend, and the internal accounting module to ensure continuity of transactions while all stores were closed. A big success according to Annette: "Incredibly, with AcuToWeb we were up and running again within just a week, having introduced two payment gateways so that our customers could settle their accounts safely online in the comfort of their homes. We used Shopify to create a quick frontend that fully integrates with our backend solutions."

She concludes: "Despite the horrors of COVID-19, in terms of technology advancement, the pandemic actually did us a favor and pushed our modernization agenda forward. Having introduced AcuToWeb, we are now agile in our decision making and managed to move a mountain by carrying the smallest stone first. From minor things like generating electronic price tags, to major ones such as the introduction of online payment and a full online store, we are back to being the thriving business we want to be."

Watch the Railway Furnishers Video



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