

## UNITED LIFE: IMPROVED DEVELOPMENT CAPABILITY TO ENHANCE BUSINESS INTEGRATION

Visual COBOL delivers improved development efficiency



URL: [www.unitedfiregroup.com/life](http://www.unitedfiregroup.com/life)  
 Industry: Insurance  
 Country: USA

### Highlights

- A single standardized development environment – Microsoft Visual Studio
- Improved development team collaboration and productivity
- Increased application integration capability
- Reuse of existing IP and business rules

“Visual COBOL has enabled us to reuse our existing COBOL business rules, improve integration with other systems, and clarify our vision for future enhancements.”

**Jim Veglahn,**  
 Programming Manager, United Life Insurance Company

### At a glance: United Life Insurance Company (United Life)

United Life operates through a network of agents in more than 1,300 independent agencies, providing life insurance and annuity products to individuals, businesses and organizations. United Life is a wholly owned subsidiary of United Fire Group.

#### Solution

- Visual COBOL for Visual Studio
- COBOL Server

#### Challenge

United Life runs a wide variety of applications, providing functions such as underwriting, processing new business, and claims management. In total, over 1,000 individual applications are in use across the organization. With different development strategies used within the company, it was difficult to consistently maintain or enhance these applications and services - and there was no transparency between application environments. Jim Veglahn, Programming Manager for United Life, explains the challenge: “We accommodate access to applications for our own internal workforce, as well as some remote workers. Our network of over 1,300 agency partners also has access to certain key applications. We needed more flexibility within our application infrastructure. This would enable us to introduce additional tools and leverage new options, to enhance these applications in the environment which best suit them.”

#### Market evaluation to ensure success

United Life was using Micro Focus Net Express and was keen to expand the scope for development, particularly in the .NET and Object Oriented Programming (OOP) arena. This would bring the development skill set more in line with its web team, working on online applications, and would improve joint team collaboration.

Veglahn and his team looked at an open source COBOL solution, as well as commercial ones. The open source option did not have .NET capability which would limit United’s integration opportunities. COBOL compile and debug features were very basic and at the command-line level.

The commercial solution which was considered did offer integration possibilities, but United Life has a large number of Indexed Sequential Access Method (ISAM) files, dating back to its mainframe days.

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Using the commercial solution, all of these files would need to be converted to a new format, involving additional prep time and testing, which was deemed too time-consuming and expensive to pursue.

Discussions with Micro Focus revealed Visual COBOL to be the right fit for the organization, as Veglahn explains: "Being a Micro Focus customer already, we saw that Visual COBOL would enable us to seamlessly integrate our ISAM files and SQL tables, following the future direction of our information management. It offered us the .NET capability we were looking for, with minimal changes required to our existing code and applications."

A Proof of Concept was conducted to check the import and compilation support for United Life's existing application code. It confirmed that all Net Express features would be maintained and that the ISAM files would be managed appropriately.

#### Visual COBOL in daily practice

After a successful Proof of Concept, United Life moved its application infrastructure to Visual COBOL without significant effort. In total, in excess of 1 million lines of code were converted easily and without manual intervention. All applications were tested and then copied over to the production server during the implementation phase. The whole modernization process was completed within three months.

Veglahn comments: "Already we're seeing some efficiency gains by using Visual Studio for COBOL code debugging. We've also developed a couple of applications in the .NET/Visual Studio framework. Visual COBOL provides more tools and options to meet project requirements and integration needs. Even in these early stages we're experiencing productivity improvements of up to 20%. Visual COBOL and Visual Studio allow us to eliminate transactional steps previously required between COBOL and web applications, reducing our overhead and complexity."

#### Development improvements

In the medium term the team is working on identifying reusable COBOL business logic routines to improve

application re-use and access within its development cycles. Custom class libraries are built so that the ISAM files are easily referenced, saving time. Overall, improvements in application modularity and reusability are key to United Life and will bring with it future development efficiencies.

The new development environment enables United Life to provide more powerful features and easier data entry/edit in an application which tracks its marketing representatives' activities. A report is now created as a PDF file and emailed directly to the requestor instead of being printed.

#### Positioned for future success

Increasing the development skill sets within the organization and streamlining the backend processes will set the team up for faster project completion and improved collaboration with the web development team, which uses the .NET framework too. Veglahn looks to incorporate OO Programming into new applications exploring WinForms and WPF to create a better end user experience. He explains: "Visual COBOL has enabled us to reuse our existing COBOL business rules, improve integration with other systems, and clarify our vision for future enhancements. Our motto is 'superior service for our agents and clients', and this new infrastructure is certainly contributing to this."

#### About Micro Focus

Micro Focus, a member of the FTSE 250, provides innovative software that allows companies to dramatically improve the business value of their enterprise applications. Micro Focus Enterprise Application Modernization, Testing and Management software enables customers' business applications to respond rapidly to market changes and embrace modern architectures with reduced cost and risk.

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