

NO DATA SHOULD BE AN ISLAND IN THIS AGE OF OBJECT ORIENTATION

As more IT operations become available to fresh produce companies, Anglia Business Solutions demonstrates the importance of keeping pace with the latest technological developments, to allow the greatest possible flexibility in data configuration and avoid the bygone norm of battling "islands of data"

IF INFORMATION technology can be a real business facilitator, the other side of the coin is that it can also be an inhibitor to growth. There was a tendency in the past in the fresh produce industry to stick with systems that are long past their sell-by date. The thinking was "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". This is like sticking with an old car because you have paid for it, even if it is painfully slow, only does five miles to the gallon and needs a lot of maintenance.

Many forward-thinking organisations have now realised that failure to take advantage of recent technological advances actually costs them real money. As business has speeded up, a cumbersome system that has not kept pace means

overheads due to data duplication, transcription errors that cause customer queries and dissatisfaction and a lack of real management information. When the costs of operating in this way are factored into the business, the overhead costs can be substantial. It is sobering to think that to employ a £10,000-a-year administrator, you will have to ship £1 million of goods at two per cent net margin when overheads are taken into consideration, just to break even.

However, this loss of profit is not the real drawback. Much more seriously for the business is the lack of flexibility inherent in such a set-up. Systems that cannot easily or cost effectively be changed to reflect changes in the company's business

product to a major retailer; let's call it C & R. The retailer needed to upgrade its legacy business management system to bring it up to date. The process took eight months and cost C & R a shed load of money. Moreover, it forced the company to freeze its stock range until the upgrade was done. This meant that it could not take on any new product lines during the key selling season. The real costs in terms of lost sales to the retailer in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods market can only be imagined.

The real problem with the traditional older systems is the technologies used to create them. Many were designed prior to the arrival of new development techniques such as object-oriented technology.

The older programming languages and databases meant that designing and developing integrated business management solutions was difficult and time consuming. Any changes in one part of the programme could cause another to fail and more complex issues were a nightmare to trouble shoot.

As a result, customer-requested changes to operating solutions were slow, labour intensive and costly. In addition, upgrades were infrequent as they caused major support issues across multiple operating system platforms.

By contrast, object-oriented technology is a much more productive and flexible development environment. It works by facilitating the rapid creation of re-usable

new field to a screen or changing the field descriptions could mean waiting for a new software version and hoping that it met the need. In some modern systems, such changes can be carried out in seconds by the customer.

Lincolnshire Field Products provides a good example of this system flexibility in action within the fresh produce industry, with regards to an immediate request to change the selfbill procedures. With the company's old legacy system, this would have been costly both from a direct and indirect viewpoint.

IT manager Paul Witherington explains: "The change to the selfbill system would have taken weeks to complete and incurred external costs to develop and implement the modifications," he says.

"This would also have meant the double handling of invoices while the work was in progress. The LINKFresh system enabled us to carry out the changes internally within two days of notification with no external development costs."

In today's global marketplace, digital information has helped businesses to speed up by providing faster access to accurate information. The new wave of business management solutions has enabled companies to improve their efficiency by automating more of their processes.

This has released people to work on more productive customer-facing activities, thus improving client satisfaction. In addition, systems that are more responsive to changes in

"Failure to take advantage of recent technological advances can result in gaps in the main operations application."

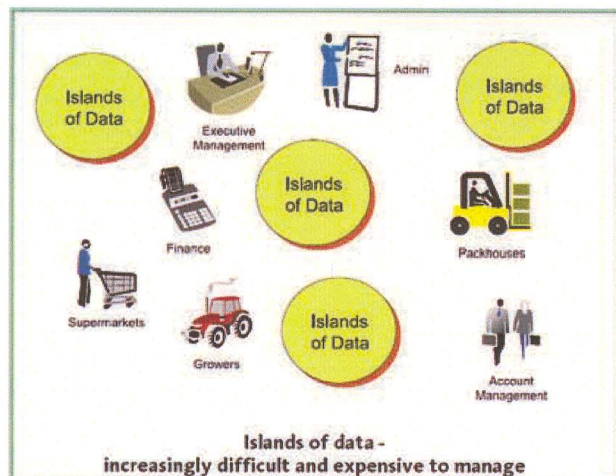
that it is no longer fit for purpose in today's world. Some of the symptoms of this malaise include a raft of sub-systems to plug the gaps in the main operations application. This leads to islands of data as illustrated in the diagram below.

The business impact of these systems can be the hidden costs of operating in this environment. These include high administrative

model or to respond to new client demands are a hindrance rather than a benefit to the business.

The impact can range from the inability to take advantage of a new revenue stream to the loss of a key customer. This does not just happen in smaller companies, as the following example illustrates.

An Anglia customer (not in the fresh produce sector) supplies



"Digital information has helped businesses to speed up by providing faster access to accurate information"

software objects in a framework where they can easily be integrated. The objects work in ranges designed by the programme authors.

As a result, other software developers can quickly add additional system functionality while customers can make high-level changes to suit their particular business processes.

For example, in the past, adding a

business models provide companies with the degree of agility necessary to survive and thrive in today's cutthroat marketplace.

To see examples of how modern business-management applications have helped fresh produce companies compete, visit the LINKFresh & Microsoft Executive Briefing to be held in Cambridge on November 9.