



Extending the Core Product

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Many software providers work with partners. This includes ISVs (independent software vendors), systems integrators, and technology partners. Based on the extent to which the software provider leverages

the services of its partners could benefit the actual end user of the technology in many different ways.

When Meridian Systems, www.meridiansystems.com, Folsom, Calif., announced its Prolog Connect product, one of the more interesting features was its Microsoft Office Business Applications (OBAs), which allow bi-directional data exchange between Microsoft applications including Excel, Word, Outlook, and SharePoint, with Prolog Manager. A Collaboration Pack featured within Prolog Connect consists of several pre-configured OBAs to streamline workflows around daily work journals, punchlists, RFIs (requests for information), submittals, meeting minutes, and reports.

The OBAs received positive reactions from customers, liking the idea of working in an application they are familiar with, namely Excel, and feel confident they are interacting with Prolog in Excel and not just simply exporting and importing. However, some starting to think about the management of these files--particularly one of Meridian's partners.

"The immediate issue that came to mind for us was how users would manage all of these Excel files being used," says Wes Smith, president, The Cram Group, www.thecramgroup.com, New York, N.Y. Smith's company does not typically develop products, rather it focuses its efforts on developing hosting services for applications, including Prolog and Document Locator from ColumbiaSoft, www.documentlocator.com, Portland, Ore.

A few customers using Prolog via hosting services of The Cram Group liked the Excel OBA for the purposes of doing bulk engineering data management, for example. But one challenge was managing version control of a broad user base of the OBA. This prompted The Cram Group to take a look under the hood.

"We wanted to leverage things they already use, and these customers used both Prolog and Document Locator," says Smith. "So we thought, document Locator can be used to manage version control and because (of its) security it can publish the actual OBA to the user. Since we all have them coming in through this portal and we know the user name and password is all integrated, so we can make sure that each user only sees the OBA they are supposed to see. The company may have 50 OBAs but one user may only need to see a few."

By leveraging the capabilities of Prolog and Document Locator, The Cram Group was able to create a central page--a document repository--with a window into Document Locator and also contained a feature that only deals with OBAs.

"This now lets an application administrator for a company work in Document Locator to manage OBAs but publish them through a specific page to every user they have, and determine who sees what information and determine if they want the person to launch it locally so they can use the Excel file on their desktop or if they want to launch it through a server-based version (a remote desktop)," says Smith.

The Prolog Connect product is a good example of a product that leverages the use of Web services effectively, allowing the exchange data via the Internet between different applications and platforms. This has allowed companies to develop complimentary products that build on this platform—one recent example is NoteVault, www.notevault.com, San Diego, Calif. The service developed by The Cram Group is in the same vein, albeit not in the form of an actual third-party product.

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