

MICROSOFT WEB SOLUTION PLATFORM CASE STUDY

Institutional Investor Magazine

Highly Respected Investment Publication Uses Microsoft Web Solution Platform to Support and Enhance Brand, Position for Growth

Published: July 2001

With the help of the Microsoft Web solution platform, one of the world's most well-regarded investment journals has extended its brand of high-quality financial journalism and widely respected analyst-ranking data to the online global financial community. Using the Microsoft Web solution platform to address challenges posed by a prior solution based on Linux and Perl, Institutional Investor has streamlined content management and solution development and positioned itself comfortably to support future growth.

Situation

One of the most important principles of investing is knowing when it's time to move. Among the people most keenly aware of this principle are the executives of Institutional Investor magazine, which has provided expert information and analysis to the world's most influential issuers, investors, and intermediaries for over 30 years. In late 1997, Institutional Investor began publishing a Web-based version of the magazine operating in a Linux and Perl environment, but before long it became clear that the magazine needed a stronger and more comprehensive Web platform for supporting new revenue generation and extending the brand. So, in mid-2000, Institutional Investor executives were ready for a move of their own: from the Linux/Perl-based solution to one based on the Microsoft Web solution platform.

To help them make the decision and later to develop the solution itself, the executives enlisted Plural Inc., the 1999 Microsoft Certified Solution Provider of the Year. According to Plural Technical Manager Shawn Shell, the decision was easy after he and the executives reviewed the Microsoft Web solution development tools. "We were confident that the tools in Visual Studio, including Visual InterDev and VBScript, could provide Institutional Investor the environment necessary for it to create a more content-rich experience, to enhance its highly respected analyst-rankings database, and to provide additional functionality as needed," he says.

Shell also saw a good fit in a content-management system known as Resolution, from NCompass Labs, that's based on Active Server Pages (ASP). "The system looked to be ideal in terms of integrating with the magazine's existing business and content-production processes, which were



Solution Overview

Customer Profile

Online version of one of the world's leading investment journals.

Business Situation

Needed a more productive development environment, better reliability and scalability, and less costly maintenance than a prior Linux- and Perl-based solution could provide.

Solution

Benefits

Simplified content management and rapid deployment, greater reliability and scalability, reduced maintenance costs.

Software

Microsoft Windows 2000 with Microsoft Internet Information Server 5.0

Microsoft Site Server 3.0 Commerce Edition
Microsoft SQL Server 7.0 Standard Edition
Microsoft Visual Studio 6.0 (including Visual InterDev and Visual Basic)

Partners

Plural Inc.
NaviSite (for SLA hosting)
NCompass Labs

Scenario

B2B
B2C

Microsoft

based largely on Microsoft Office and other Microsoft technologies,” he says. “By contrast, in the Linux and Perl environment we found no content-management tools that supported the kind of compatibility with database and e-commerce technologies we knew Institutional Investor would ultimately need.”

Shell figured the integrated environment of the Microsoft Web solution platform and the Resolution content-management system could also help to meet another pressing concern of the Institutional Investor executives: time to market. To attract the greatest possible audience for the new solution, they wanted to launch it in conjunction with the announcement of their annual All America Research Team, a renowned ranking of industry analysts. This meant Shell and his team would have to do it all—from strategy, design, and coding to content management, testing, and deployment—in barely over three months.

Solution

That’s exactly what they did. In October 2000, Institutional Investor introduced its new online solution, IImagazine.com, and announced the year’s All America Research Team ranking—to an amazing reception. Just hours after the announcement, the site recorded 2.4 million page hits and 1.5 million page views, and an additional 5,000 people signed up to receive the ranking announcement.

IImagazine.com features content in three primary areas: a database of sell-side equity-research analysts, content channels, and magazine archives going back to 1995. The solution runs on an n-tier architecture consisting of an ASP-based presentation layer; a business logic layer including the content-management system and VBScript-based scripting components supporting the analyst-rankings database and interaction with Microsoft Site Server Commerce Edition; and a database layer including Internet Information Server with scripting components that communicate with Site Server 3.0 Commerce Edition for profiling and registration.

Benefits

“Remarkably Fast Deployment”

Looking back on the development and launch of the new IImagazine.com site, Shell credits the integrated nature of the Microsoft Web solution platform for helping his team to meet the challenging deadline. “The remarkably fast deployment was due largely to the comprehensive integration among the Microsoft development, database, and platform tools and the content-management system,” he says. For example, developers were able to rely on a simple approach to deliver 2,500 separate magazine articles into the solution. They began by creating a small database from an Excel spreadsheet containing metadata about the files. Then, using an ASP script communicating directly with the content-management system, they built Web pages dynamically based on that data.

“With Visual Studio and NCompass Resolution, it took me just a day or two to write the ASP script and set it loose on the data, and just 45 minutes to build all 2,500 pages,” Shell explains. “I would challenge anyone to try to do this with the limited tools available in the Linux environment.”

Site Metrics

Total end users: 40,000 to 60,000 registered, 1,865 per day

Total page views per day: 115,000

Database volume: 150 MB

Hardware

Two Web servers, each of them a Compaq DL380 with dual Intel Pentium III 733s, 512 MB RAM, and 3X18 GB hard drive space, and one database server, a Compaq ProLiant 6400R with dual Pentium III 550s, 1 GB RAM, and 3X18 GB hard drive space.

“With Visual Studio and NCompass Resolution, it took me just a day or two to write the ASP script and set it loose on the data, and just 45 minutes to build all 2,500 pages. I would challenge anyone to try to do this with the limited tools available in the Linux environment.”

Shawn Shell
Technical Manager
Plural Inc.



Extending Functionality

Partly because content production and overall development have been made so painless, Shell and his Institutional Investor colleagues are eager to expand the functionality of the solution. For this they are grateful for what he calls “the easy upgrade path” provided by the Microsoft Web solution platform. For example, the analyst-rankings database is one of most popular features on IImagazine.com. For now, users can obtain survey “end results” from the database, but in the future they also will be able to obtain multidimensional views of the base data. To enable such functionality, Institutional Investor will create an advanced query tool based on Microsoft SQL Server 7.0 OLAP Services or Microsoft SQL Server 2000 Analysis Services.

Other plans call for the solution to support commerce transactions such as subscriptions to the print publication or to a premium section of the online magazine featuring content that’s unavailable to the general public. For this, Institutional Investor will upgrade directly from Site Server 3.0 Commerce Edition to Commerce Server 2000. This upgrade path is ideal for another reason as well, Shell adds, because the content-management system plugs directly into it. “When the time comes to add personalization to the solution, we’ll be able to easily base that enhancement on the Commerce Server 2000 Personalization Engine.”

Poised for Growth

Putting all this together, Institutional Investor Publisher Walker Jacobs says the most attractive thing about the Microsoft solution is that it enables his company to grow at its own pace. “No matter how quickly we may want to enhance our software or expand our online offerings, we’ll be able to find developers experienced in Microsoft tools and technology,” he explains. “We also can easily expand our hardware platform thanks to Microsoft’s support for ‘scaling out’—using multiple networked hardware systems instead of a larger and less versatile server machine.” Jacobs goes on to say that this support is one of the sharpest points of contrast between the Linux-based solution Institutional Investor was using before last October and the solution it is using now. “The main point is that having a Microsoft-based solution, we can simply ‘bolt on’ additional components when we want to enhance existing functionality.”

In conclusion, Jacobs says the Linux platform just wasn’t strong enough to support the increasing levels of performance and functionality his business demanded, but the Microsoft platform has proved to be a completely different story. “We’re very pleased with the Microsoft products we’ve used so far, and we look forward to continuing to enhance and extend our solution on the Microsoft Web solution platform.”

“No matter how quickly we may want to enhance our software or expand our online offerings, we’ll be able to find developers experienced in Microsoft tools and technology. We also can easily expand our hardware platform thanks to Microsoft’s support for ‘scaling out’—using multiple networked hardware platforms instead of a larger and less versatile hardware platform.”

Walker Jacobs
Publisher
Institutional Investor Magazine

The Microsoft Web solution platform enables building and deploying integrated Web solutions that get to market quickly—from high-traffic e-commerce Web sites to corporate intranets to enterprise supply chain integration. It provides the fastest, easiest way to develop Web applications that integrate and interoperate with existing applications, suppliers, customers, and future applications and devices. The Microsoft Web solution platform consists of a set of complementary products that provide unmatched enhancement and adaptability of Web applications today and in the future. The core is Windows 2000, an operating system and application server with built-in Internet services that enables developers to focus on adding business value to their applications. Building blocks include Visual Studio, SQL Server, Site Server 3.0, Site Server 3.0 Commerce Edition, SNA Server, and the COM+ component and programming model. All are best-of-breed products and technologies leveraging the skill and knowledge of more developers worldwide than any others.

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products or services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada information Centre at (800) 563-9048. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information via the World Wide Web, go to <http://www.microsoft.com/>.

For more information on Institutional Investor magazine products or services go to <http://www.iimagazine.com/>. For more information on Plural Inc. go to <http://www.plural.com/>. For more information on NaviSite go to <http://www.navisite.com/>. For more information on NCompass Labs go to <http://www.ncompasslabs.com/>.

© 2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

This case study is for informational purposes only. MICROSOFT MAKES NO WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, IN THIS SUMMARY. Microsoft, ActiveX, BizTalk, Visual Studio, Windows, and Windows NT are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. The names of actual companies and products mentioned herein may be the trademarks of their respective owners.