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## Project report: Keeping track of contract costs

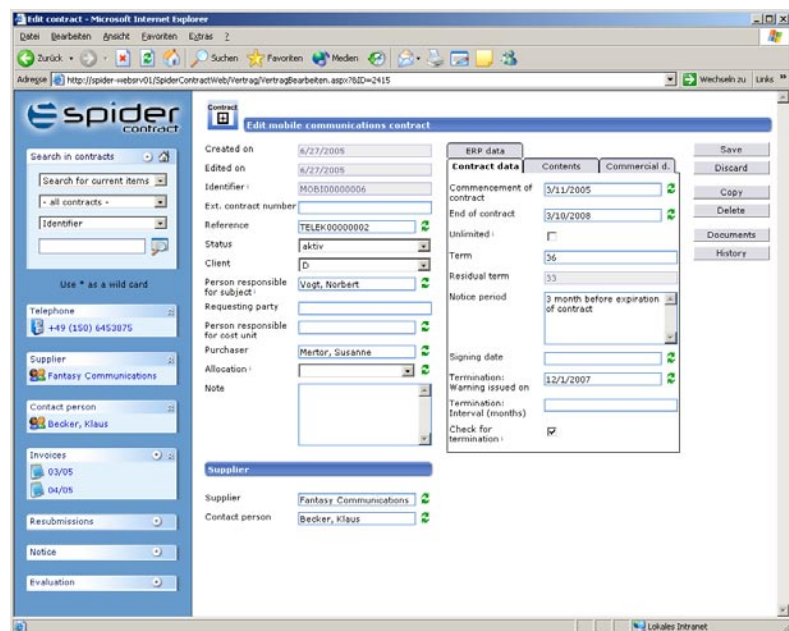
Problems which cannot be solved using standard software repeatedly occur. This gives system specialists working close to customers an opportunity of acting as first-movers in discovering new tasks and developing the right software to solve them. One example which illustrates this is the ECS spin-off Spider.

by ComputerPartner editor  
Dr. Ronald Wiltscheck

As part of companies' efforts to save money, various contracts are also scrutinized more closely. Many mobile communications or leasing contracts provide for automatic renewal regardless of whether this is actually necessary. For example, the employee concerned may have long since left the company but his mobile telephone contract remains in force. Or the fleet needs to be cut back. As there was no software capable of solving these problems back in 2001, ECS AG established Spider Lifecycle Management Systeme GmbH in the autumn of that year. The new company's task was to develop and then market a suitable product.

### Dotnet given preference over J2EE

The Number 20 in the ComputerPartner list of the largest systems providers in Germany had already established contact with insurance



company Alte Leipziger, which was the first to deploy the new software for managing various types of projects. This is because whenever it develops new products Spider GmbH always seeks to verify the benefits in a real-life project. The company also adopted this best practice strategy in designing the contract management module. Af-

ter it had proven its merits at Alte Leipziger, it was further developed into a standard product. The 2004 version of Spider Contract is expected to be completed in February of this year.

However, to get this far, it was first necessary to develop a preliminary functioning release of the software. Thus, Spider LCM GmbH set

about doing precisely this at the end of 2001. For the first time, the responsible staff were faced with the decision as to which platform to use for the new product. The two alternatives were the Dotnet Framework and J2EE.

Both technologies were compared and evaluated in the light of the purpose of the product as well as other parameters such as availability, performance and development costs. Ultimately, Spider GmbH went with the Dotnet development environment as ECS's programmers were already very familiar with it and thus expected to be able to cut development times for the software. "The well-known disadvantages of the COM architecture had already been eliminated with the introduction of Dotnet," explains Marius Dunker, project manager at ECS. The combination of the area of deployment, performance and development time ultimately led to a decision in favor of the Windows world rather than J2EE.

### Microsoft's four-phase model

Thus, the ECS developers worked very closely with Microsoft in creating the entire Spider product family. After some eight person/months had been invested, a preliminary prototype saw the light of day. Finally, in 2003 it was possible to launch the pilot project at Alte Leipziger.

In a preliminary phase, the ECS experts sat down with the customer to define all the tasks to be covered by the software. A profile of requirements – called the "vision and scope" document by ECS – was prepared in a series of joint workshops between the two partners. This phase of the project took around three weeks.

This was immediately followed by the planning phase, which entailed configuring the interfaces required by Alte Leipziger with its SAP sys-



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“With all of our products, we first seek practical experience in a specific project.”

Marius Dunker,  
Managing director of Spider GmbH.

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tems and IBM services. Thus, one of the aims was to ensure that the manager of a given cost center was only able to example the contracts of relevance to him. The ECS developers defined the necessary XML interfaces, cast them in software and documented their work in the functional specifications manual. This phase of the project took around three weeks.

Now Spider started to customize the software on the basis of the existing software. This involved installing the interfaces on site, re-configuring them where necessary and performing several tests until everything worked to the customer's satisfaction. This all took around eight weeks.

The fourth and final phase of the project was simultaneously the longest one. ECS tinkered for around three months to ensure that the Spider contract management system was finally ready to go live. At the same time as the actual roll-out, users and administrators at Alte Leipziger were trained, while the technicians made the final adjustments to the system. Incidentally, such a project sequence comprising four phases reflects the Microsoft Solution Framework, a guide issued by Microsoft concerning procedures for more complex software projects.

### Different contracts an obstacle to importing data

Although the schedule had been complied with, the project at Alte Leipziger was not without its hitches, of course. The task was to import data from a wide variety of different contracts to the new system. Where this data was available in the form of Excel tables or static SAP data, for example, it was possible for it to be transferred to Spider Contract using corresponding import modules.

Some contract details were also stored in the Microsoft database Access and were thus fairly easy to import. What proved to be rather more difficult, however, was the integration of the contract data stored on Alte Leipziger's mainframe systems, forcing the Spider experts to adjust their solution.

At the moment, the mainframes are being accessed by means of the standard connectors based on the 3270 screen scraping technology. However, direct access to static data is also available on IBM services, e.g. via ODBC (Open Database Connectivity) to DB2 databases on AS/400 midrange machines, which are now being marketed by IBM under the I-Series name.

## Solution Snapshot

<b>Customer:</b>	Alte Leipziger Lebensversicherungsgesellschaft a.G., <a href="http://www.alte-leipziger.de">www.alte-leipziger.de</a>
<b>Problem:</b>	System administrators quickly lose track of the many different types of contracts; as a result, mobile communications contracts, for example, may be automatically renewed although they are no longer required.
<b>Solution:</b>	Contract management solution Spider Contract: Central management of contracts; browser-based access for any workstation; development platform: Microsoft Dotnet Framework
<b>Vendor:</b>	Spider Lifecycle Management Systeme GmbH, <a href="http://www.spider-lcm.de">www.spider-lcm.de</a>
<b>First contact:</b>	April 2001
<b>Project duration:</b>	January - October 2003
<b>Greatest challenge:</b>	To incorporate different types of contracts: service and leasing contracts, maintenance and licence contracts, purchase and rental contracts
<b>Unexpected difficulties:</b>	Replication of product contracts from DB2 database running on an IBM I series midrange service required a customized solution
<b>Implementation period:</b>	Three months
<b>Vendor resource requirements:</b>	Roughly 60 person/days
<b>Cost of project:</b>	Approx. EUR 70,000
<b>Project breakdown:</b>	Software licences: 40 percent; services: 60 percent
<b>Service and maintenance contracts</b>	Entered into with Spider Lifecycle Managementsysteme GmbH
<b>Training:</b>	Two-day training for users and administrators
<b>Benefit for customer:</b>	Lean, central contract management; simplified workflow processes in handling contracts; automatic reporting; updated selective access to contracts by individual departments; hundreds of telephone calls with employees now rendered unnecessary; amortized six months
<b>Benefit for the vendor:</b>	Further customers: DZ Bank, Schwäbisch Hall, Gedas Berlin

### XML is the exchange format between Spider and SAP

However, new leasing or mobile telephone contracts can be entered directly in Spider Contract, with the corresponding static data automatically forwarded to Alte Leipziger's SAP system thanks to the Spider-SAP Contract connectors. They provide direct access to merchandise groups, cost centers and orders in the SAP system and thus allow the invoice data for any contract to be reconciled at any time.

XML is used as the medium for this purpose. Spider imports the static and contract data from the SAP system by having a connector read

the native data and then translating it into an XML format for importing to Spider. XML is also used for exporting new contract data from Spider Contract to the ERP system.

The decision to use XML as the exchange format will ensure continued future compatibility as XML is increasingly being used in more and more areas. In fact, optimists think that it will soon replace SQL as a database language.

Yet, it is not only on account of this decision that the customer is extremely satisfied with Spider. In fact, shortly after the completion of the project (October 2003), Alte Leipziger was able to achieve preliminary savings: "We have been able to reduce the number of filing cabinets in our central office from 17

to 13," says Hartwig Moldenhauer, head of the Company's central purchasing. In fact, he expects the investment to pay for itself in only six months - a remarkably short period of time given roll-out costs of EUR 70,000. However, a central solution for managing all contracts is a benefit until itself.



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