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Letter to the Editor

Another look at legacy systems

Regarding the recent article "Feds confront their legacy applications" [GCN, May 6, Page 1], from my perspective the scenario is not as dark as it was painted in the article.

As the CIO for Virginia's Department of Human Resource Management with more than 23 years experience in IT, I am a defender of the legacy systems because they were built to handle huge volumes of information efficiently. I also find that new technologies are making it possible to open the legacy systems to the user community via the Web.

I know how hard and expensive is to migrate legacy systems to open environments, especially when we have a lack of documentation and the budget is short. However, those proprietary systems already have transactional processes that allow real-time access to the data. Instead of trying to migrate them to an open environment with all the costs involved, why not use them as they are, and change only the way users can see and use them?

GCN quoted an analyst as saying, "Making services available via your Web site doesn't make your life easier; it makes it harder" because "... expectations of end-users are being set by Land's End or MySimon.com." That made me think something is not right.

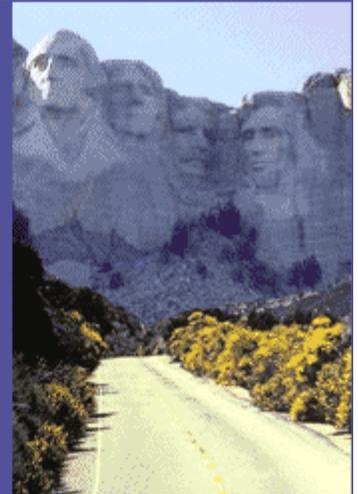
My department is responsible for Virginia's human resources management system. Our constituents are the governor, including his cabinet and staff, state agencies, legislators and their staffs, employees, citizens and local government officials. They rely upon us for advice, guidance and assistance.

We have a legacy Unisys mainframe using a proprietary network database and a proprietary user interface, running real-time transactions. In addition, we have a data warehouse in relational Oracle databases on a Unix server. We also run data in Windows NT environments using Microsoft SQL Server.

We thought about how to integrate everything and make the data easily available to our constituents. With the Unix and Windows NT systems, we do not have any problem. But things go differently when we try to also integrate the Unisys mainframe.

From the legacy system, we felt the need to bring health benefits information to some 120,000 Virginia state employees so they could access

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and make changes to their own records. We thought about it and we did it. The project started on Jan. 1 with a deadline of April 15.

It went live as scheduled and now all the employees participating in the Commonwealth of Virginia's Health Benefits Program are able to use the Web application. In this period, we made available—in real-time via the Web—some 50 legacy Cobol transaction programs. These are applications our users are glad to have and that alleviate the workload of the administrative systems of each state agency.

We did not migrate or convert our legacy system. We are still using it to all of its potential. It was easy to make it accessible via our Web site. We just needed to look for the right product and for the right staff to do the right job. Users are not expecting us to build Web sites like Land's End or MySimon. They are expecting us to provide a better way for them to access their information without being dependent on their agency's administrative services or any other central services to do it.

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