

# Open M Used for Pioneering Oil System

by George Black

InterSystems' Open M application development environment has enabled oil distributor Butler Fuels to gain a lead in mobile computing. The Cheltenham-based company has used Open M to develop a client/server system, with the client side aboard its fleet of oil tankers and the server side in its head office. It is claimed to be the first remote transaction processing system to have been deployed by a U.K. oil distributor.

Butler Fuels is the largest distributor for Fina plc, the U.K. arm of the Belgian oil company. The company runs a fleet of 100 vehicles, and since transport is by far its biggest cost it has been looking for savings in operating them. On-board computing was seen as having the potential to cut costs of deliveries by rationalizing schedules and avoiding tankers traveling empty for long distances, as they have often done in the past. Mobile phones could not cope with the amount and complexity of data involved in such an operation, it was decided.

Last year between March and October the company piloted the new client/server system, which was developed by Computer Design Systems (CDS) of Salford. The development tool chosen was Open M from InterSystems.

Butler Fuels has worked closely with CDS on developing applications since 1980. CDS developed a new application called "The Deliverer," using Open M, which was piloted for Butler Fuels and tailored to its own operations. Drawing on CDS's five years of expertise in mobile technology, the system uses Vodafone's GSM digital mobile phone network to process business transactions between the tankers and the central computer system at the Cheltenham head office. Drivers have personal computers in their cabs programmed with their itinerary and delivery schedule. At each visit money can be collected, receipts can be printed and customers' signatures recorded as proof of delivery. Further orders can be taken at the same time and transmitted straight to the office. Drivers can also receive

new instructions on their schedules while on the road, which was not possible in the past.

"The new system we've put together makes the driver's job much more proactive, as well as saving us a lot of money on wasted mileage," said Butler Fuels' managing director John Woof. He expects to get a payback on his investment in around a year. Since the success of the pilot, the company has been rolling out the system to other drivers.

The company has chosen to install the systems first in tankers which cover the most outlying areas, where the benefits of more efficient scheduling are likely to be greatest. But introducing the systems without disruption and without upsetting the workforce was the biggest challenge of the whole project.

"Getting the drivers to accept the change was our biggest worry, since most of them had little or no previous experience with computers," said Wood. But Avonmouth driver Nigel Miles, who was an early enthusiast for the concept, volunteered to be the pilot for the system and has since then become a roving trainer of other drivers. Now there are 20 of them with onboard PCs and by the end of the year about half of the fleet should have been converted. The rest are expected to take it on during 1998.

"The drivers' resistance is being quickly overcome because Nigel Miles has a lot of credibility and his enthusiasm rubs off on them," said Woof. "It's now becoming widely accepted by the drivers, as they see it's to their advantage as well as that of the company."

The touch PC is designed so that instructions can be processed by a single touch of a window on the screen, instead of using conventional keyboards, with which many drivers would be unfamiliar. These are ruggedised hand-held PC devices certified for use in an oil environment, which were supplied by ACS Data of

Salford; ordinary notebook or laptop computers would not have stood up to the rough treatment which they often get on the road in tankers. The touch PC is becoming a recognized device for on-truck use in the oil industry, but none is thought to be so far advanced in deploying the technology as CDS is at Butler Fuels.

Butler Fuels' contracted development manager, George Hunt, said that one of the secrets of the success of the project was the adoption of InterSystems' Open M software. "We realized that a crucial element in setting up a system of this kind is the amount of expertise available, as it cannot be bought off-the-shelf," said Hunt. "Anyone wanting to do this is bound to have to develop a lot of new software in order to integrate the system into the organization."

The company had expertise in Open M, which proved to be an outstandingly powerful and flexible software tool for developing a client/server system," he said.

Butler Fuels has made ten acquisitions in the past decade and had to integrate all of those systems. As Woof commented, "Our business has been constantly changing and Open M has allowed us to keep up with the pace of change. We could not have expanded the business in the way that we have without the support of Open M. All in all, it has been fundamental to our growth."

Hunt noted that working with Open M had proved much more cost-effective than some of the more widely-used relational database systems.

"Open M's architecture allows us to expand a client/server system in a modular way, so we're not faced with a major investment in new hardware every time there's a change in the business," he said. "Open M easily outstrips Oracle in this respect. With other such databases we'd have needed at least three times as much hardware to support these applications. Unlike some other leading databases, Open M doesn't need a lot of tools added to the database to create a development environment. It's second to none in flexibility. In a volatile industry it enables us to react very quickly to change and that is the key to success. I can't think of another development environment which would enable us to do this so easily."

The U.S. consultancy, Gartner Group, has described Open M as "the best-kept secret in the information systems industry," and despite InterSystems' recent efforts

to sharpen its marketing this remains largely true. The M language from which Open M originated has been extremely popular among its many users in the medical and financial services sectors. But the M community has long been seen by the rest of the industry as living in a world of its own and its message gone unheeded, even since M was greatly expanded into the Open M development environment. However, by producing users as eloquent in its cause as Butler Fuels, InterSystems seems to be starting to do justice to Open M at last. **M**

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*George Black is a freelance writer and a U.K. journalist.*

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