

# Manage

## CASE STUDY FINE TUNING BEST OF BREED SOFTWARE

# When applications step on toes

Much work is done by software designers for interoperability, writes Adam Turner.

**B**elow the surface of a seemingly well-behaved "best of breed" software solution, applications designed to work in tandem are often vying to be top of the heap.

No organisation will buy an accounting package that doesn't support its job scheduling system and vice-versa. The tension in these symbiotic relationships extends to the software vendors, which often enhance their applications to assume the roles of other products through "functionality creep" when the list of functions the software performs continually expands.

This presents a problem for companies such as Sydney's Proware, which writes software called The Service Manager (TSM), a field service application for manufacturers and traders to manage service, repair and maintenance operations. Founder David Younger released the first version of TSM in 1987 and it has expanded to cover job logging, scheduling, notification and dispatch as well as managing service agreements and generating invoices and purchase orders.

Younger recognised the benefit of tight integration with popular accounting packages, such as MYOB and QuickBooks, to reduce data re-entry. Three years ago this was extended to customer relationship management applications such as GoldMine and ACT.

After years of developing custom interfaces between TSM and new versions of accounting and CRM applications, Proware has standardised the process as of QuickBooks US 2003 through an object library of meta-functions.

"The new system allows us much more quickly to develop a standardised interface into an accounting product, but it allows us to document that and farm it out to the vendors who know their accounting products much better than we do," Younger says. "This is obviously of major benefit to us, as every time we build an accounting interface we have to learn the accounting product... they can have an interface to TSM much quicker."

Exactly who should do this work and whether Proware should be forced to pay for a software development kit (SDK) when both parties would appear to benefit from the interface is "a bone of contention," he says.

"These guys should be giving it away for nothing to the developers because by having an interface with our package it will help them sell their product," he says. "Having said that, in the real world a lot of these vendors do ask you to pay for some sort of SDK, which hopefully includes a version of their accounting product."

While Proware is working hard to integrate TSM with popular accounting applications, those applications' developers offer modules to do the work of TSM. Often TSM will defer overlapping functionality to an accounting package.

One accounting software developer, after acquiring a field service product, removed func-



tionality from the application program interface used to integrate other applications.

"People say why don't you just write your own accounting module for TSM but if I do that

I'm stepping on other people's toes and I'm just going to lose business," Younger says. "We see TSM not as competing with but enhancing the functionality of those accounting products."

David Younger, founder of Proware, writes software that integrates with other applications. He has been in the industry for 15 years.

PICTURE: TSM

### NEXT SPEAK

**Application Program Interface:** a set of building blocks, routines, protocols and tools for writing software.

**Software Development Kit:** a kit for developing software for a specific platform or application.

**Best of Breed:** using the best tool in its field for each task, which requires integration work rather than buying a package of tools from one vendor.