

EIM Controls Extends Self-Service Tool to Distributors with Ixion, L.L.C *Portal Improves Productivity, Reduces Costs*

Headquartered in Houston, Texas, EIM Controls has been manufacturing high-quality valve actuators since 1949 and is responsible for inventing many of the designs now standard to the actuator industry. Today, you'll find EIM valve controls at work on every ocean and continent, in applications ranging from water treatment, petrochemical and power utility to aircraft carriers and guided missile cruisers.

When this leading manufacturer needed to automate its product configuration process for its global network of distributors, leaders turned to Ixion, L.L.C., for a solution. Ixion delivered, designing a custom, self-service application that is accessed by distributors through an IBM® WebSphere® portal. The portal has not only improved efficiency for both distributors and employees, but it has also resulted in bottom-line savings for the business.

Product Catalogs Prove Cumbersome for Distributors

In situations where manual control of valves is inefficient or otherwise prohibitive, actuators allow users to exert automatic or remote control over valves from a centralized control room. Such actuators are mission critical for many industries including oil and gas, water and sewage, and construction.

To account for variables including control signal input type, operating temperature, supply pressure, and torque and speed requirements, actuators are highly configurable. EIM manufactures hundreds of component parts in its factories to ensure efficient execution in any scenario.

EIM ultimately sells its valve and gate actuators through a global network of distributor companies. Until recently, EIM would publish a comprehensive product catalog each year, enabling the distributors to view actuator components and select the appropriate technologies. Users had to navigate multiple charts and diagrams to identify actuators that would meet their client's requirements and then manually calculate a price quote.

"Unfortunately, the existing process was cumbersome and time-intensive for our distributors," said John Drisko, marketing manager for EIM Controls. "The majority of our distributors work with multiple manufacturers, making it virtually impossible for them to be experts on any one technology. As a result, the project engineers required EIM's assistance in selecting actuators, diverting staff attention from more important tasks."

The bottom line was also being impacted. The cost and level-of-effort required to publish a new product catalog often dissuaded EIM management from making price updates – even as material costs escalated. In addition, because the existing process was prone to human error, distributors occasionally miscalculated client quotes – quotes EIM honored out of respect to the end-customer.

"It was imperative that we make a change," said Drisko. "Our distributors needed a tool that would simplify the actuator sizing and selection process, and internally, we needed a centralized process for updating and disseminating product and pricing information."

With those goals identified, EIM engaged trusted IT provider and Premier IBM Partner, Ixion L.L.C., to recommend a solution.

Extending Access to a Self-Service Configuration Tool

"We knew a portal would ultimately be the simplest way to extend application access to distributors," said Steven Gerhardt, client manager for Ixion L.L.C. "The first step, however, was

creating a customized application that could intelligently sort through the company's thousands of parts and identify the right actuators for each job."

After understanding the critical variables that are involved in selecting an actuator, Ixion developed a sizing and price quote tool using IBM Lotus® Domino®. Through a simple Wizard process comprised of drop-down selections and limited data entry, users can identify the best actuators for an end-customer's business requirements. The solution matches the inputs to product data in the Domino database and presents the user with the optimum three actuator choices along with pricing information.

Following development, EIM employees began accessing the configuration tool through Lotus Notes and tested it extensively. Then came the critical next step - extending the application to distributors.

"Because it enables rapid portal creation with minimal development work, we selected IBM WebSphere Portal Express for the underlying technology," said Gerhardt. "Having the initial application built in Domino was an advantage as well. WebSphere Portal Express v 6.0.1 has new capabilities for implementing the Domino portlet, which eliminated manual procedures for several configuration steps."

During implementation, Ixion customized the portal to support and integrate the major technologies, applications, and databases EIM uses internally, including iSeries, Lotus and Microsoft.

Improving Efficiency, Reducing Costs

With the WebSphere Portal Express solution now in production, distributors simply log onto a secure Web site and are able to identify actuators and create price quotes in a simple, five-step Wizard process. Based on the data entered, the application returns the best three actuators for the job requirements, leaving room for distributor autonomy based on price and other variables. All entries and changes are saved through the portal so distributors can review and refine job quotes as necessary. The final price quote can be exported to Excel or printed directly from the portal.

"The sizing application – as accessed through the portal – truly enables self-service for our distributors," said Drisko. "Users with even limited knowledge can successfully select an actuator and create a price quote. As long as the user has answered basic questions about the customer environment correctly, the actuators will work and the quotes will be accurate. The risk of human error has been substantially reduced."

The burden on EIM employees has been curtailed as well. With the portal in place, EIM employees can focus on business-critical job tasks rather than helping distributors navigate complex product catalogs. Management of product and price data is also simplified. Information is updated one time in the Domino database and is automatically extended to internal users through Lotus Notes and to distributors via the portal.

Because the company no longer has to publish its extensive product manuals, it will realize significant savings in print, distribution and labor costs. Price quotes can be updated in Lotus Domino whenever needed; ensuring fluctuating material costs are accounted for in actuator prices.

A key feature of IBM WebSphere Portal Express is its ability to interface between multiple applications and present data to users in a unified manner with a single log-in. EIM has already added its open-order report to the portal, allowing distributors to view all in-process orders and sort them based on criteria including purchase order number and delivery date. EIM is currently evaluating other applications that may be added to the portal as well.

For now, the two applications available in the portal have made a significant impact.

“Ixion has helped us build a portal that we’re proud to offer to our distributors – one that makes work life infinitely simpler for them,” said Drisko. “With this powerful tool at their disposal, distributors will be even more likely to recommend our industry-leading actuators - a win/win scenario for EIM and end-customers alike.”

Solution at a Glance:

Industry: Manufacturing

Challenge: EIM Controls’ existing process for actuator selection was cumbersome and time-intensive for its distributors and diverted staff attention from more critical tasks.

Solution: Using IBM Lotus® Domino®, Ixion L.L.C. developed a custom configuration application that automatically recommends actuators based on key criteria. Ixion then extended this functionality to distributors through a portal built on IBM WebSphere® Portal Express v. 6.0.1.

Results: The portal has simplified the actuator selection and pricing process for distributors and has freed EIM employees to focus on their jobs. The solution will also allow the company to realize significant savings in print, distribution and labor costs as comprehensive product catalogs are no longer published.

About Ixion, LLC:

Ixion, L.L.C., headquartered in Houston, Texas, is an IBM Premier Business Partner specializing in the design and implementation of advanced software solutions. Ixion helps its customers increase revenue opportunities and decrease costs by providing strategic business solutions and implementation services that leverage advanced web and collaboration software technology. For more information, please visit www.ixiononline.com.

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