BY EVAN SCHUMAN, *Contributing Editor*

Legacy Systems
Live On

But skills in older systems are drying up

THE WORLD OF LEGACY INTE-gration is not a place for managers who like their issues neat and clean. Legacy integra-tion requires you roll up your sleeves and get dirty.

In the mid-90s, **IBM** (www.ibm.com) fought off chants of "the mainframe is dead" and made strong arguments that the mainframe had unique strengths and should be integrated into multi-platform net-works. The IT community agreed and the mainframe's installed base barely took a hit. Ellen Martin, the VP for information systems supply chain for $5.5 billion clothing giant VF Corp., was one of many technology execu-tives convinced.

Fast-forward to fall 2002. The 21st century legacy hardware and software combo faces new enemies: time, retirements and a relentlessly uncool image. Even staunch legacy

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Partly out of necessity — since many COBOL programmers have retired — CGs are preparing to close down some of their older systems. But as global manufacturers like VF have discovered, there can be per-formance and scalability issues associated with shuttering older mainframe-based applications.

system supporters — such as VF's Martin — have a pragmatic need to prepare to ditch the systems due to a lack of people willing to write for them.

Legacy systems are "still viable, they work and they are very efficient," Martin says. "It's not glitzy, but if you remove them, you will give up perfor-mance and you will have scalability issues. I guarantee it."

That said, Martin laments she will

soon have to give up the good fight, conceding the battle due to a lack of COBOL programmers to be found anywhere other than retirement com-munities. "We're not teaching COBOL in schools anymore," she says, adding that many young programmers would rather work on Java or other newer lan-guages, which they regard as more interesting than COBOL. "The fact is that legacy systems are a dying breed because we've forced them out."

Adding Platforms

That means that Martin's multi-platform setup will add even more platforms. Today, she has mainframes han-dling shop floor controls, production, warehouse distribu-tion and order management, with financial, materials man-agement, some production planning and costing handled by **SAP** (www.sap.com), supply chain planning by **i2 Technologies** (www.i2.com), forecasting by **Logility** (www.logility.com) and product devel-opment handled by **Gerber Technology's** (www.gerbertechnol-ogy.com) WebPDM, to name just a few.

VF, with its lineup of Lee, Wrangler, Rustler, Riders, Britannia, Chic and Gitano brands, accounts for one out of every four pairs of jeans sold in the U.S. In the intimate apparel segment,

it sports Vanity Fair, Vassarette, Bestform and Lily of France, while chil-dren's sales appear as Healthtex. JanSport and Eastpak are daypack brands and The North Face is a line of tech-nical outdoor apparel and equip-ment.

VF is not alone in its reluctant move to kick proprietary systems out the back door. Bob French, the CIO for O'Cedar Brands, reports that his company has just completed a full transition away from legacy applications. But O'Cedar's incentives were very differ-ent. Instead of having systems they liked but couldn't find enough pro-grammers to maintain, O'Cedar's management had the programmers tweak and amend the software when-ever a new need arose. The problem was that the system had been rewrit-ten and patched so often that it began to threaten collapse.

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"It was 10-year-old software and they had hacked it to death," CIO French says, bluntly. "They were no longer able to get any enhancements out of that software because it had been so modified so often. It was start-ing to not meet the business needs. A major point of pain was the inventory accuracy."

Points of Pain

At VF, Martin discovered her own points of pain "We have a lot of mov-ing parts. Message buses that have to be monitored and data translation/mapper problems. There is no direct communication between these packages and things are lost in the translation. Things sometimes

don't come out the backend the way they went in the front end. It's like the United Nations," Martin says, "but we actually pull it off."

As VF moves steadily away from mainframes and into different appli-cations for different functions, Martin is being forced to understand how the individual applications interact and function more than she'd like, if for no other reason than troubleshooting. "I know that computers work, but I don't want to know why," she says. "Now I have to know why. We need to know how the messaging works and what might fail so that we know that if we see this symptom, it's because this has happened."

But Martin says the transition is necessary and will likely prove worth-while. "Our industry has not reached the point where this is a seamless transition between software packages. VF decided that we would do the pain and agony, that we would have to deal with interactions and feeding this data back and forth. Functionally, we have already seen benefits from these best-of-breed solutions. When the smoke clears, we will be better off."

The computing age began with refrigerated rooms filled with huge mainframes. And despite massive miniaturization giving us PDAs and low-cost laptops running at 2 GHz with 70-GByte disks and 2-GByte RAM, the mainframe has not been overpowered or out-secured. And yet, it's the lack of a perceived coolness that is preventing these systems from continuing.

That lack of continuation may be forcing manufacturers to endure the pain needed to replace the main-frames with lots of smaller systems, which will likely prove to be a better end-result. How's that for a legacy legacy?