

**Technical building blocks**  
**:: a business white paper ::**



**Background - Progressive Solutions and bisTrack**

Progressive Solutions develops and supplies bisTrack business software primarily to distribution companies serving the construction industry. bisTrack was originally developed for use by companies that supply, import and process timber. Because of its strong timber related functionality, it is still widely used throughout this sector as well as by builders' merchants, steel stockholders, plumbers' merchants and electrical wholesalers.

The standard bisTrack package is used to process sales, manage stock, simplify purchasing and gather intelligence. However for greater functionality, additional bisTrack modules have also been developed and these include Web Track for companies who wish to offer internet based trading, bisTrack Mobile which enables staff to access the software remotely and eBusiness for paperless trading.

bisTrack software is built using Microsoft architecture and is therefore easily integrated with existing software. Because of this, modules are now being developed for wider use throughout the construction industry to complement incumbent systems. Specifically, 'bolt on' modules which enhance data mining and electronic trading and document tracking are helping to deliver projects on time and within budget.



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## **Management overview**

The bisTrack software is developed in a Microsoft Windows environment, which gives it significant differentials over many of the other products in the construction supplies market.

bisTrack is designed and developed in Microsoft Visual Studio, with SQL Server in its native form. This gives bisTrack benefits for performance, data access and familiarity, with its standard Outlook-style of 'look and feel'. Mainstream third-party Windows products, such as Microsoft Excel and Crystal Reports are effortlessly integrated with the software, giving greater productivity and the familiarity of a standard toolset.

## **Introduction**

In today's economic climate, merchants and wholesalers are rightly diligent about capital expenditure and must pay strict attention to ensuring that every pound spent will generate a return on investment (ROI). Even more important is the timing of that return. The speed with which value and return can be achieved has become a critical consideration for customers weighing competing investments.

## **Technology lifecycle**

For many organisations, large capital projects such as IT infrastructure replacement have been delayed for many years due to financial constraints. With the increasing age and obsolescence of IT infrastructures, some merchants are now stepping up to take on this daunting challenge. Shrewd construction suppliers are seeking ways to ensure that the updated technical infrastructures they implement will have greater longevity and provide a platform for growth, especially as newer technologies such as next-generation mobile devices and point of sale scanning become prevalent.

The bisTrack architecture is a solid platform for growth that allows organisations to leverage existing investments in skills and technology while establishing a foundation for adopting new innovations as they become available. All companies have choices in the marketplace for their IT platform. Customer-focussed IT suppliers recognise that they cannot control the whole platform, and therefore must work with an open and flexible framework that co-exists alongside other platforms and technologies.

bisTrack's Microsoft architecture not only ensures a robust infrastructure to build on, but Microsoft's technology leadership also helps mitigate the risks of technology obsolescence in the long run.

## **Microsoft SQL Server 2008**

SQL Server 2008 delivers on Microsoft's Data Platform vision by helping your organisation manage any data, any place, any time. Store data from structured, semi-structured, and unstructured documents, such as images and rich media, directly within the database. SQL Server 2008 delivers

a rich set of integrated services that enable you to do more with your data such as query, search, synchronize, report, and analyse.

SQL Server 2008 provides the highest levels of security, reliability, and scalability for your business-critical applications. To take advantage of new opportunities in today's fast-moving business world, companies need the ability to create and deploy data-driven solutions quickly. SQL Server 2008 reduces time and cost of management and development of applications.

Access data from across your enterprise and provide control over your data no matter where it's stored—from the largest servers within the data centre to desktops to mobile devices. SQL Server provides a comprehensive platform that delivers intelligence where your users want it. Information workers can access data directly using the tools they use every day, such as the Microsoft Office 2007 tools.

### **Product architecture**

bisTrack is built using Microsoft technologies. It is a multi-tier application that leverages COM+ services to provide real scalability to the application.

The database can be SQL Server 2003 or 2008, hosted on a server running Windows 2000 or 2003, with service packs and any recommended security patches applied. Windows 2008 is supported. A complete Hardware Requirements specification is published elsewhere.

Using the industry standard SQL server architecture gives tremendous advantages to the end user, from the rich tool set, from inbuilt replication and from the wide pool of experience in the market place. The COM+, SQL Server n-tier architecture makes future migration to .NET straightforward. The database design, table naming and field naming have all been done with end-user reporting requirements a top priority.

### **User interface**

The user interface for bisTrack has been modelled on applications that most users will be familiar with. The bisTrack application 'look and feel' is much like Microsoft Outlook. Instinctively new users know how to use bisTrack thus minimising end user training needs.

Not only is the user interface familiar, HTML can easily be displayed within the application container. This means web pages, company intranets, performance dashboards, other custom content and the like can all be closely integrated with bisTrack. It also leaves the application open for a certain amount of customisation by the experienced IT manager.

bisTrack architecture allows the user to choose a single central database or to use replication and have distributed databases by region or trading location. The modern toolset makes this 'either/or' choice a practical option.

### **Look and feel**

Whilst the Unix operating system was once the byword for reliability and continuous availability, new people coming through up through company can find the interface clunky and archaic. Like it or not, these people are inherently comfortable with a Microsoft Windows environment. Familiarity,

easy access to expertise, minimal training load are all sound reasons for selecting a standard business operating system and Microsoft-based development toolset.

There is considerable comfort from working with a Microsoft Gold Certified partner, with many years' experience in the construction supplies market. There is also a worldwide technical backup availability from a standard toolset.

Standard windows, toolbars and grid controls make experienced Windows users feel immediately at home and encourage rapid productivity.

### **Microsoft Excel**

Many businesses rely upon Microsoft Excel as a decision support tool and are very comfortable manipulating data within the package. Whilst bisTrack supports an extremely range of business intelligence tools to support strategic decision making (plus the ability to create your own) it also smoothly handles import and export via Excel for those more comfortable in that toolset.

### **Crystal Reports**

Crystal reports is used within bisTrack as a document layout and reporting vehicle. Paper management reports and the invoicing paper trail make use of this industry-standard mechanism to layout out the information from bisTrack when hard copies are required. The software also makes extensive use of PDF and email to deliver electronic copies of documents when preferred. Some organisations have reported significant four figure savings on their stationery bills by moving more of their reports to electronic delivery, thus contributing to their 'green agenda' and carbon reduction targets.

### **Choose a reporting tool**

Being an open architecture, clients can use whatever reporting, query and business intelligence tools they are comfortable with. A user business question might be answered with Microsoft Access, Microsoft Excel, Business Objects, Cognos Business Intelligence, or whatever. It's open, you choose – which is how it should be.

The recent concentration on advanced Business intelligence tools, such as dashboards and smart views has brought new levels of transparency to your data.

### **Business intelligence dashboards and smart views**

Intelligence is a suite of bisTrack add-ons and core components used to give you business intelligence about your trading patterns. Sometimes called Management Information Software, these tools give you access to a level of detail your senior staff will relish. Business Intelligence is an invaluable tool for analysing the flow of information around a business. Like a rolling annual report of key performance indicators, management will never be out of touch with what's happening on the ground.

### **Cluttered screens answered by custom interfaces**

The problem with fully-featured software applications is that they can seem over-featured to a junior employee or one just starting out with the software. That's why the best software makes it easy for you to simplify what the end-user sees, so they can get their job done without distraction.

Advanced users not content with using the software out of the box have a wealth of options available to customise the end-user experience. Every taskpad is customisable so more basic users see only the options you want them to see. System administrators also have the additional security of tightly controlled user permissions, allowing one user to view quotations (for example), another to view and amend and a third to approve and delete.

### **Forms designer**

As a second line of defence against clutter, you can also customise the layout of some of the key data entry windows. System administrators can shape the way users see the software to match a company's working practices. For example, if you're concerned about how long it will take staff to become productive with a new system, you could map the fields in order entry to be similar to the system you are replacing. You could enter addresses as freeform text for simplicity, or enforce the discipline of separate fields for first line, second line, town, county, postcode, etc.

### **Hardware platform supply**

Progressive Solutions can recommend a hardware and network supplier, or customers can work with their own. The selected hardware and network supplier normally specifies and installs all hardware required and brings everything up to a 'bisTrack ready' state. Progressive's Services Team then co-ordinate with the chosen supplier to ensure a robust partnership between hardware and software.

### **Thin client ready**

bisTrack supports thin client deployments either using Windows Terminal Server or Citrix/Metaframe. A thin client implementation is transparent to the bisTrack application. Existing infrastructure is leveraged in larger organisations, with no requirement for wide-scale replacement of serviceable client equipment.

### **Benefits**

bisTrack is written using modern, flexible and extensible techniques. The software makes best of use of current development practises, allowing you to capitalise on your technology investment.