

Equinox Builds Bridges into Custom Apps for Actuate iServer



Businesses thrive on information, and reporting tools are critical to their ability to glean insights from the realms of data they collect about customers, suppliers, sales and many other key areas. Actuate Corporation of San Mateo, California has been servicing the business intelligence needs of large organizations for many years. Their iServer product line helps firms such as financial institutions with scalable, mission-critical rich Internet applications (RIAs).

Back-end Customization

But servicing these users poses challenges, with each client having their own customized backend data schema, security systems and reporting requirements. Actuate found that getting iServer installed and integrated into customer environments was often time and skill intensive, demanding developer resources that were sometimes better utilized elsewhere.

Better with BIRT

In 2004, Actuate initiated the Eclipse Business Intelligence and Reporting Tools (BIRT) project, to provide a reporting tool on the Eclipse platform. In addition, Actuate was able to leverage BIRT and Equinox to make significant enhancements to iServer. "The BIRT

"Choosing Equinox gave us powerful server capabilities to extend iServer into custom applications and seamless integration with BIRT."



reporting engine is based on Equinox, so integrating it into iServer was an important part of our product strategy", said Wenfeng Li, Actuate's VP of Product Development, "The result has been a lot more flexibility in meeting our customer requirements."

Based on Equinox and OSGi, Actuate built a platform of well-defined and extensible components that provide their customers and professional services team with the ability to perform various integration tasks in the field and without the aid of developers.

Not only did Equinox modules provide a way to minimize time spent by developers on customer support issues, it also made development itself easier. As Li explains, "We have teams in other offices, and coordinating development can be a challenge. The OSGi component model makes it easier for teams to coordinate their efforts." For example, one team may define an interface and another can reliably write a driver to it. The well-defined OSGi API makes this possible.

Empowering Professional Services

Actuate has benefited greatly from the extensibility of Equinox. All too often, customers require integration with data sources that are unique to their environment. These data sources could be proprietary formats or integration with enterprise applications that aren't supported by the normal off-the-shelf product. Now Actuate's iServer includes an open data access component that can be extended and specialized to meet customer needs.

Similarly, customers tend to want their enterprise reporting integrated with their security system, ensuring that highly sensitive reports are only available to people with the correct access rights and strong encryption. Again using the extensibility of Equinox, Actuate was able to define an authentication and encryption extension that can be easily customized by the customer or Actuate's professional services team to integrate into a customer security system.

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March, 2008

Just-In-Time Customer Requirements

Since releasing the Equinox version of iServer, Actuate has seen big advantages for themselves and their customers. "Our professional services people love it", says Li. "They are empowered to create solutions to cater to customer needs on the fly" As a result, Actuate is able to incrementally support many backend systems and then leverage that support for subsequent product release cycles.

This gives Actuate's development team greater flexibility to focus on the core features and value of iServer, while the professional services teams add direct value to the product deployment via product extensions.

Actuate plans to take advantage of more Equinox components in the future. As Li puts it "Equinox has given us a robust platform for enterprise reporting. We'll continue to extend our use of Eclipse and OSGi in the future."