

The Ultimate Insurance Policy

June 2007 (p.12)

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The importance of change management rises steadily with companies' chief information officers and, generally, information-technology departments, observes Rick Porter, vice president of Revelation Software Concepts, Pty. Ltd. (RSC, www.xrsc.com), a provider of change management software based in Melbourne, Australia.

"Version control/management is essential to a software-development organization," adds Kevin Rowley, manager of automation software vendor Wonderware's (www.wonderware.com) product definition team in Lake Forest, Calif.

Both change management and version control/management focus on asset protection. But version control is a subset of change management, states Gimmi Filice, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada-based product marketing manager for GE Fanuc Automation's (www.gefanuc.com) group responsible for Proficy change-management software.

Tom Ganter calls change management "the ultimate insurance policy." Implementing it "allows you to have that level of comfort that assets are protected," says Ganter, quality-assurance manager for software products in GE Fanuc's software engineering group, also in Edmonton. To Ganter, comfort is vital because developers must safeguard code they've developed as well as test applications. "Those are intellectual properties with hundreds or thousands of hours of development," Filice adds.

To guard itself, GE Fanuc has always had version control on the development side, but has used change management for only eight or nine years, Filice reveals, noting the development group continuously uses its own Proficy software to protect its assets. Obviously, such tools track modifications. They do so by recording and then archiving changes, thus providing audit trails. Security plays a big role, he emphasizes, adding that electronically locking files is part of security. Check-in/check-out features allow only one person to make changes at any time, forcing others to have read-only status, Filice explains.

When and if developers make future changes, they can revert back to earlier versions, Ganter notes. That functionality is not just protective, but also efficient. "Without this product, we would need multiple copies in place, somewhere," he says. In plant environments, loss of such

software-related information could be devastating because, typically, "companies spend millions of dollars for development."

Like GE Fanuc's software group, Wonderware evades such damage by constantly using a version control/change management system—primarily in its research-and-development group, but also corporately around the world at all development sites—to manage the entire code base for the company's software products. Rowley notes that Wonderware employs IBM's (www.ibm.com) Rational ClearCase software.

"Multiple versions of the [Wonderware] product can be maintained separately. Having a historical record of all changes made to a code module provides benefits in understanding code history and tracking down when defects were introduced," he explains. "Without a source control system, all of this would be very difficult."

Don't ask for trouble

Though not an automation vendor, Orlando, Fla.-headquartered Chep (www.chep.com) would agree that doing business without change-management tools is asking for trouble. The company uses RSC's Rev-Trac Automated Change Control tool for large SAP enterprise resource planning systems to oversee worldwide use, movement and reuse of more than 280 million shipping pallets. The tool allows Chep to complete concurrent projects to update its asset management system across multiple regions, without disrupting core business processes.

"The Rev-Trac system is in use every time someone makes a change to the SAP-based infrastructure," explains Susan Cannington, infrastructure project lead for Chep. "The system has allowed us to manage the changes . . . so we're much more efficient." She mentions that the system is a useful risk-management tool, especially when outside consultants make changes to systems and don't apprise the company of them before leaving a site.

Clearly, change management, including version control, reduces risk and makes doing business easier. "In applications in which we've used it, it's [also] eliminated lots of micromanagement and paper pushing. It's saved an extensive amount of time," Ganter recalls.