

CUSTOMER SUCCESS



Amethyst Group

Optimizing IBM i system performance with Macro 4



"Macro 4's solutions have helped us to stay competitive by keeping down our overheads and we've also reduced the time we spend on development and manually gathering system data for analysis."

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“Macro 4’s job scheduler performs a key function for us by helping us define and configure regular jobs to happen automatically. Our business runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with hundreds of scheduled jobs occurring each day. These can be essential tasks such as collecting customer order data or sending order confirmations to customers. Some key jobs must happen at a specific time every day without fail – often out of hours – and it would be uneconomic to have someone manually managing each one.”

Chris Salkeld
Operations Manager,
Amethyst Group

CUSTOMER CHALLENGE

- Optimize the performance of business-critical IBM i systems, to maintain high standards of customer service
- Streamline IT operations and reduce running costs
- Control enterprise distribution of print output to support timely order fulfillment
- Provide the flexibility to manage large seasonal increases in transaction volumes

SOLUTION

- IBM i systems management – job scheduling, print and output management, disk management and performance management

KEY BENEFITS

- Significant efficiency savings through automation, eliminating the need to employ additional operations personnel to manage increased workload
- Low storage costs and high performance levels due to efficient disk management
- Improved capacity planning, leading to timely investment in extra processing power
- A reduction in development workload and increased responsiveness to changes in the scheduling and output delivery requirements of the business

The challenge

Amethyst Group is a recognized leader in the provision of warehousing and distribution services, with over 25 years’ supply chain expertise. The company operates one million square feet of warehousing space, with around 550 employees in six distribution centers. A growing part of its business is in providing fulfillment services to the online retailing web sites of high street fashion brands such as New Look, Burberry and Jane Norman.

Amethyst approached Macro 4 with a requirement for a performance and systems management solution to support its internally written warehousing and distribution application which runs on the IBM i platform. The Amethyst application ensures sales orders are accurately processed, so that the right goods are packed, labelled and delivered within deadlines agreed with customers.

“We’re in a highly competitive industry with demanding customers for whom we process over 3.5 million orders a year, including around three million internet orders. Many of our customers have large peaks in sales activity due to seasonal demand. As our in-house distribution and warehousing application is central to what we do, we approached Macro 4 to help us optimize its performance so we can deliver consistently high levels of service and manage large fluctuations in our customers’ business,” explained Chris Salkeld, Operations Manager at Amethyst Group.

At the same time Amethyst was keen to reduce costs and maintain a lean IT operation. Automation was key: the chosen software was required to automate as many of Amethyst’s daily processes as possible and remove the need for overnight working. Mr Salkeld and his team also wanted to minimize the consumption of costly IT resources such as CPU and disk space.

As Amethyst Group has ambitious growth plans for the future, the solutions also had to be able to help the company scale up to meet additional demand as the business expands, without a corresponding increase in costs and headcount.

“We use Macro 4’s performance management solution to keep our systems running at peak levels and to track our workload and CPU consumption. It’s vital for us to keep tabs on this to ensure we have the capacity to comfortably manage seasonal increases in our customers’ business transactions and keep our systems running smoothly and responsively.”

Chris Salkeld
Operations Manager,
Amethyst Group

“Output management plays an essential part in helping us process customer orders. We rely on it to make sure there are no printing mistakes or delays which could cause work bottlenecks and stop us meeting the strict fulfillment targets agreed with customers.”

The solution

Amethyst is using four Macro 4 IBM i solutions: SUPERMON® Performance for performance management; AUTOMON® Scheduler for job scheduling; SUPERMON® Disk for disk management; and AUTOMON® Spool for print and output management.

The first solution to be adopted was job scheduling, which enables Amethyst’s operations team to automate a broad range of daily, weekly and monthly processes and to run a lights out operation out of hours.

Macro 4’s print and output management solution helps drive activity in Amethyst’s warehouses by ensuring that important order information such as pick lists, dispatch notes and shipping labels end up at the right printer, in the right warehouse, in good time.

Amethyst’s warehousing and distribution application generates approximately 5,000 separate print spool files a day, mostly dispatch notes relating to orders that need to be processed for next day delivery. This raw data is turned into the required documents by third party composition software before Macro 4’s print and output management software directs them to the correct printer queues at the destination warehouses, to ensure timely delivery of customer orders.

Macro 4’s performance management solution provides real-time performance monitoring and control for Amethyst’s IBM i servers. It automatically generates a range of reports to help Amethyst analyze current and historical performance data, monitor trends and pinpoint and resolve potential performance problems quickly.

The disk management solution helps Amethyst to manage disk space efficiently. It provides automated routines for monitoring, reorganizing and reclaiming disk space and Amethyst relies on it to keep disk utilization low in order to maintain good application performance and minimize storage costs.

The benefits

Amethyst Group is one of Macro 4’s longest standing IBM i customers, having used Macro 4’s systems management solutions for over seventeen years. Mr Salkeld is able to highlight a broad range of benefits achieved through Amethyst’s work with Macro 4: “Macro 4’s job scheduling solution is vital for us – it ensures batch processes run reliably, with no intervention from us, which is so important in a deadline driven business like ours. Without it we would need to double the size of our operations team. And as some large batch processing jobs and daily backups have to happen at 2.00am or weekends, due to the round-the-clock nature of our business, we’re saving on the expense of employing staff overnight.”

Without the print and output management solution ensuring that pick lists and dispatch notes are printed off at the right place and time across Amethyst’s sites, the warehouses would struggle to function. Both the print and output management and job scheduling solutions have reduced the need for in-house systems development and have helped the IT team make systems changes more quickly, to respond to the changing needs of the business. Without them Amethyst would have had to write additional programs to manage the distribution of printed output and to schedule batch processes. Macro 4’s disk management solution is helping Amethyst minimize its use of disk space, resulting in lower storage costs and better performance from the warehousing and distribution application. It also means backups are shorter, less disruptive and consume fewer resources.

The performance management software helps Amethyst maintain excellent service levels and continue to turn orders around quickly on behalf of its customers during times of peak demand. The solution has also been instrumental in helping to identify the need to invest in new IBM POWER7 servers when it reported that the existing servers were running at 85 per cent CPU capacity. Previously the company was using around 60 per cent of its capacity so the significant rise was taken as an early warning signal by Mr Salkeld: "We were coming up to the Christmas shopping season, which is our busiest period, when total order volumes can increase three-fold. Our customers are incredibly busy at this time of year – for example, one toy company we work with sees daily orders rise from 400 to 6,000. So we have to be totally sure we have the capacity to meet their needs. Macro 4 gives us that certainty." The migration to the POWER7s, which run four times faster than the old servers, was quick and painless, with Macro 4's solutions moving seamlessly to the new servers.

Among the reasons why Amethyst chose Macro 4's IBM i products and has used them for so many years are their reliability and simplicity: "Macro 4's solutions are intuitive, straightforward and easy to use. They are extremely reliable and are intrinsic to getting the job done. They have helped us to stay competitive by keeping down our overheads and we've also reduced the time we spend on development and manually gathering system data for analysis. And they've given us the knowledge to help us anticipate demand as our business expands," concluded Mr Salkeld.

About Macro 4

Macro 4, a division of UNICOM Global, develops software solutions that accelerate business transformation. Macro 4's cross-platform enterprise information management solutions make it easy for companies to go digital, personalize customer communications and unlock the value of their corporate content. Macro 4 solutions for application lifecycle management, session management and performance optimization are used by many of the world's largest enterprises to modernize their mainframe applications and development processes. UNICOM Global operates across all geographic regions and offers deep in-house resources and flexible IT solutions to customers worldwide.

For more information on Macro 4 products and services visit www.macro4.com.

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UNICOM® Systems, Inc. UNICOM Plaza Suite 310 , 15535 San Fernando Mission Blvd., Mission Hills, CA. 91345 USA

Tel: +1 818 838 0606 Fax: +1 818 838 0776 www.unicomglobal.com

Macro 4 Headquarters

The Orangery
Turners Hill Road
Worth, Crawley
West Sussex
RH10 4SS
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 1293 872000
Email: market@macro4.com

Belgium

Tel: +32 15 74 74 80
Email: market.be@macro4.com

France

Tel: +33 1 79 71 84 50
Email: market.fr@macro4.com

Germany

Tel: +49 89 6100970
Email: market.de@macro4.com

Italy

Tel: +39 2 213 1941
Email: market.it@macro4.com

Netherlands

Tel: +31 20 5206874
Email: market.nl@macro4.com

Spain

Tel: +34 91 443 0220
Email: market.es@macro4.com

Switzerland

Tel: +41 44 723 40 00
Email: market.ch@macro4.com

USA

Tel: +1 973 526 3900
Email: market.usa@macro4.com

www.macro4.com