

Beyond JDE

Every now and again you come across something which is worth taking more than a second glance at and this is one that I believe should be shared with my industry colleagues.

Just to put things in perspective you need to know that I'm a JDE devotee from a long way back, proud to have been a long term employee of the Company for over 16 years as a Project Manager, Technical Manager and Senior Applications Technical Specialist. It was a great company to be part of and I enjoyed a fantastic time and made a lot of genuine friends amongst both work colleagues and customers alike. Only recently have I embraced the '*Dark Side*' by moving over to independent contracting, although still very much deeply entrenched in the JDE world.

I've come across a legitimate contender amongst the horde of sometimes questionable application software alternatives being offered to clients unsure where JDE's future may lay under the Oracle stewardship. It's a product called Odyssey, built by R & D software company Mid-Comp International headquartered in Melbourne.

I had worked alongside their CEO Steve Bridges at JDE in the early 90's before he and a couple of other guys started Mid-Comp, and we still bump into each other from time to time. Knowing full well that I make my living from JDE consulting, Steve asked if I would be interested in performing an independent assessment of Odyssey. He was looking for a '*warts and all*' appraisal of Odyssey's legitimacy as a JDE replacement, and wanted someone who would be honest and critical. "*Who better to pick over it than a defender of the faithful*" was the gist of it. So it was off to Melbourne with cynicism locked & firmly loaded.

First up was a brief introduction to the Odyssey application content and an overview of the architectural concepts. Apparently Odyssey may be the largest commercial pure JAVA business application on the planet with over 24,000 classes (blobs of object programming code) and 800 .jsp (HTML) screens. Ho hum ... low care factor ... cynicism switched on & fully operational! For starters it is web delivered pure JAVA so there is the immediate departure from green screen / screen scraper / Windows interface look & feel which was a nice start.

Odyssey is visually very different, yet somehow comfortably familiar for the JDE literate and I was pleasantly surprised how quickly this transpired.

They have this concept of *Business Rules Policies* which makes just about every function configurable. The closest I can come to for a comparison is JDE Dream Writer, but Policies are more than that. Dream Writers are hard coded program switches relying on pre-defined value options existing within the base program, but Odyssey Policies are literally chunks of variable object code which get merged in at run time. "*If a client needs a new business rule, we just add another Policy to the 'plug & play' mix ... we don't normally need to touch the framework layer (program base code)*"

It is very easy to navigate once you accept that the mouse plays a major part in navigation (as is the norm for web applications). You can also set up Jump To navigation similar in concept to JDE Fast Path, but different in that the Odyssey feature allows individual user definitions which can be added to or replaced ad-hoc by the users ... all by themselves. "*No need for predefined function key exits ... easy to remember, easy to change, which means low stress levels for a newbie during training*"

The assessment tasks were straight forward:

1. perform the full gambit of normal daily transactions as you would for JDE
 - a. Sales & Purchasing
 - b. inventory & distribution
 - c. the corresponding accounting back office stuff (AR, AP, & GL)
2. try and break it

With about 15 minutes of familiarization with the basic screen disciplines and application process work flows under the belt, my Mid-Comp minders let me loose on a publicly available demo version called *Odyssey to Go*, and left me alone to fend for myself.

User manuals were provided under the *"when all else fails, RTFM"* principal, but we all knew that if someone with my years of experience needed to continually resort to the manuals then the average end user's frustration level would have already resulted in tears or swearing, so my going for the HELP would indicate a fail for that function.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that all the standard JDE operations I would expect to find in a distribution environment have been well and truly catered for here, and Odyssey in fact pleasantly exceeded my expectations. My cynicism was taking a bit of a pounding. There is also a lot of additional application functionality such as wireless EANway scan / pack, VMI, etc., which traditionally is third party bolt-on product for JDE users.

Significant thought has gone into keeping the screens uncluttered, which I'm told is the way it needs to be for high volume web traffic transactions. Coupled with a concept Mid-Comp calls *Inheritance Processing*, this makes Odyssey functions fairly intuitive.

As an example, only 4 fields need to be entered by the user to perform a Sales Order (client ID, client's reference, product ID, quantity). The rest are automatically propagated from what I can only relate to as process templates / defaults set up against a combination of the client, product, warehouse, order type, user, and financial company. The hard bit to get your head around is that these inherited defaults are hierarchical, and may have come from any level of the inheritance tree. The up side is that you can set up template models at every level of the tree to suit the business trading needs, providing unlimited ordering variations which the user keying the in order doesn't need to concern themselves with ... it's all done with smoke & mirrors.

What all this leads to is that if you can't get a user working independently on basic Sales Order Entry in less than 15 minutes or so then they may never get it. Sure, if they need to understand what they are doing beyond keying in the order then it may take an hour or so of basic training.

Realistically the entire product follows the same philosophy:

"Keep it simple wherever possible, and provide optional complexity when needed via radio buttons"

Anybody having had exposure to JDE will become familiar with Odyssey very easily indeed. The application suite is fairly comprehensive out of the box. The standard package is feature rich primarily because of the plug & play business rule Policies.

In essence I'd give Odyssey the thumbs up, as I believe it is unlikely that there would be much worth griping about from the conventional JDE customer operating in the Supply Chain / Distribution sector.

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