VAI PROMISES NEW USER EXPERIENCE WITH S2K 5.4

VAI is nearing completion of S2K Enterprise 5.4, its IBM i-based ERP offering for small and midsize companies in the manufacturing, distribution, and retail industries. With version 5.4, VAI will be delivering a new Web client that, for the first time, will offer function parity with VAI's Windows client, and look and feel exactly like other VAI products. Integration with IBM Smart Cloud for Social Business is another feature in this release.

For many years, VAI has offered a Web client for its S2K software to go along with Windows and 5250 interfaces. However, the old HTML interface didn't offer everything that was offered in the more full-featured Windows fat client interface. It had also started to look a bit stale compared to other VAI products, including S2K Salesforce, its CRM offering, and S2K Analytics, its IBM Cognos-based business intelligence offering.

The company is working on remedying these shortcomings with S2K Enterprise version 5.4, which includes a new role-based HTML interface that was developed using rendering software from Rocket Software's Seagull division and a heavy dose of the DoJo JavaScript framework. "There is parity and a standardizing of code base that can be shared between both" Windows and Web clients, VAI CIO Kevin Beasley tells IT Jungle.

S2K Enterprise users can now access their apps from any browser-enabled device, including smartphones and tablets. All they do is point their browsers toward S2K Enterprise Portal, VAI's WebSphere Portal-based application framework. Instead of selecting different URLs and signing in to each application separately, the different applications appear to the users as tabs within the S2K Enterprise Portal. VAI has also adopted the look and feel (i.e. the type fonts, colors, logos, etc.) of other S2K products in S2K Enterprise.

The result is a more straightforward and streamlined experience that is highly tailored to the user, says Joe Scioscia, vice president of sales for VAI. "ERP systems have such a wealth of functionality that sometimes it can overwhelm the average user," he says. "This new interface allows the user to say, 'This is what's important to me.' We can take S2K Enterprise and the other applications, like S2K CRM, S2K Analytics, and even IBM Smart Cloud, put this all in a portal, and customize and tailor your screen to the exact information that's important to that specific user."

With S2K Enterprise 5.4, VAI has overhauled its Web client, which can be accessed easily through the S2K Enterprise Portal. (Click graphic to enlarge.)

S2K Enterprise 5.4 will also include hooks to IBM SmartCloud for Social Business (SC4SB), the

group of social networking and collaboration products that used to be sold under the LotusLive name. "The Smart Cloud Solution from IBM gives customers things like enterprise-wide file sharing, communities, Web meetings, email, and calendar and instant messaging," Scioscia says. "You make that one of your tabs, or take the components of that and integrate it into the framework portal, and now you've got a really nice user interface that has social capabilities as well."

The new user interface in S2K 5.4 will not only be nice to look at, but also drive user efficiencies too, according to Beasley. "Just by moving to a Web browser, there were a lot of people saying, 'OK, so what?'" he says. "But once they see all the capabilities, then they have somewhat of that 'aha' moment. Now it really matters. There is a benefit. It's not moving along just for the sake of moving along."

In addition to the changing ERP architecture, the update to S2K will bring functional enhancements, such as a new truck-routing feature for distribution and warehousing operations; a rental billing module; and a new Microsoft Exchange IMAP email connector from Riva.

S2K Enterprise 5.4 was originally announced earlier this year as version 5.0.4, and was slated to be available before its annual user conference in October. However, the company decided to change the release numbering to version 5.4, and delay delivery to the second quarter of 2013. While the Windows client is ready to go, the Web client still needs some work. For more information, see www.vai.net.