

ActiveBatch®

Customer IT Automation Success Story

Nation's Largest Outdoor Advertising Company,
Lamar Advertising, Achieves Real-Time Data
Transfer Efficiency with ActiveBatch



Company: Lamar Advertising

Industry: Advertising/Marketing

Customer Site: Baton Rouge, Louisiana, United States

Brief Company Overview:

Lamar Advertising, headquartered in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is one of the largest outdoor advertising companies in North America. With the advent of digital billboards several years ago, the need for real-time data transfers became paramount to daily operations. Lamar was struggling to meet these needs with its homegrown job scheduler, which required heavy scripting and time-consuming maintenance. To overcome this challenge, Lamar's IT department went out to market for an IT automation solution that could handle the complexity of its real-time data and business demands.



LAMAR



SUCCESS STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Limitations of a homegrown scheduling system
- ActiveBatch as an automation solution for real-time data transfers
- Improved accounting & operations functions without limitations
- Integrated Jobs Library & ActiveBatch training makes an effective IT team

Heavy Scripting Puts Lamar on the Road to Centralized Automation

Lamar Advertising is as much a part of America's roadways as traffic lights and rest stops. The 113-year-old company, based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is one of the largest outdoor advertising companies in North America, operating more than 315,000 displays across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Lamar's portfolio of advertising options includes billboards, interstate logo signs, and a variety of transit advertising formats. Today, the company ranks first in operating the most outdoor displays in the United States and has more than 3,000 employees across 200 locations throughout the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.



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With the advent of digital billboards several years ago, the need for real-time data transfers became paramount to daily operations. Creative content for more than a thousand digital boards is furnished in real time from the company's Network Operations Center (NOC). A webcam on each board points back at the display, generating a live image that NOC technicians use to verify insertion orders and to troubleshoot technical problems.

Between the constant image refreshes from the digital webcams and Lamar's accounting and operations functions, the demand for efficient computer processing and IT Operations was mission-critical. As a result, Lamar's IT department went out to market for an IT automation solution that could handle the changing nature of technological innovation and the complexity of its real-time data and business demands.

Real-Time Business Demands Drive Need for Centralized Automation

At the time, the company was struggling to meet the business's real-time demands with its homegrown job scheduler. As new technologies and applications were introduced, there was no efficient way of integrating them without time-consuming coding and a lot of manual workarounds, making the automation framework very complex and difficult to change.

"For some time, the amount of labor required from our IT staff to schedule data processing was daunting," says Jude Robert, MIS Operations Manager for Lamar. "We had to write scripts that governed every business task from contract management to general ledger entries. Our homegrown scheduler was simply costing too much to maintain—it consumed the time and abilities of one of our key IT programmers, which was having a real impact on our IT efficiency."

Lamar's IT department recognized it needed to replace its homegrown scheduler with something flexible, feature-rich, and affordable. In 2010, Robert went out to market to look at possible automation solutions for Lamar.

Learn more at ActiveBatch.com 



The Solution: ActiveBatch Workload Automation

Lamar found the solution it needed in ActiveBatch. Robert was attracted not only by ActiveBatch's robust Integrated Jobs Library, but also its technical support. "It came down to two products—ActiveBatch and one other. However, Advanced Systems Concepts' support team was more responsive to our questions—and one of our top priorities was to get excellent support," he notes.

Using the Integrated Jobs Library, Lamar's Operations team was able to minimize the time and resources it had previously spent on scripting. "ActiveBatch allows us to get a better handle on what we're running nightly. It also manages near-real time tasks like our webcam updates, which are refreshed continually, 24 hours a day," Robert said. "Now everything is handled with one very flexible, centralized solution."



Lamar Advertising has been in business since 1902.

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- Edgar Kirchem, MIS Operations Manager, Lamar

Advanced Automation Capabilities Improve IT Agility

Nimble and effective IT operations is a necessity for Lamar. MIS Operations Manager Edgar Kirchem has been with Lamar for over four years and is the primary ActiveBatch Support and Operations lead for the IT Department. According to Kirchem, Lamar's IT department is primarily Windows-based and is composed of approximately 80 individuals, 40 of who regularly use ActiveBatch.

Lamar utilizes ActiveBatch for a variety of different processes, including Accounts Receivable processing. Lamar recently purchased an Accounts Receivable system and uses ActiveBatch to handle incoming payments and facilitate secure file transfers to their banking institution. "With ActiveBatch, we've been able to significantly reduce errors in our Accounts Receivable process." Kirchem stated.

In addition to Accounts Receivable processing, Kirchem and his team use ActiveBatch for data warehousing and ETL processes to generate business reports. "ActiveBatch interfaces to the data warehouse and runs SQL queries against the database, generating reports for IT and business end-users," says Kirchem.

Success with Event-Driven Automation

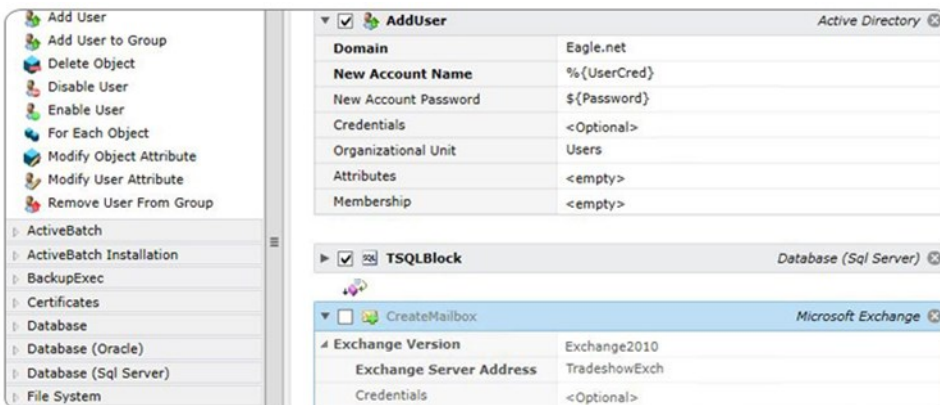
The introduction of ActiveBatch has also provided new capabilities for the Lamar MIS team. "Our homegrown solution had no inherent functionality like ActiveBatch does," says Robert. "Copying a file wasn't part of the system, for example. We had to implement even the simplest tasks in code. We also were very limited in notifications. Now we have easy options for email triggering, event-based scheduling, and even .NET Assemblies."

ActiveBatch's event-based scheduling is most often used in conjunction with file triggers, notes Kirchem. ActiveBatch supports file triggering on both Windows and non-Windows systems upon the creation, modification, appearance, or deletion of a specific file. Using ActiveBatch's event-driven architecture, processes can be initiated when specific business or IT events occur. For example, organizations who frequently send and receive invoices could set up an ActiveBatch job that would email invoices to customers based on the appearance of a file in a specified folder.

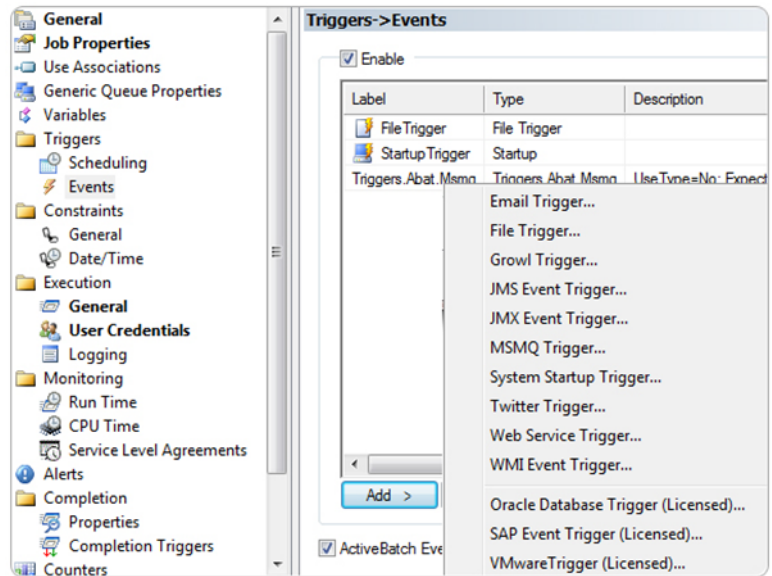
Prebuilt Logic Simplifies Workflow Creation and Saves People Resources

Once the company installed ActiveBatch, it almost immediately began to realize the people resource savings. "Any time we can take an IT assignment out of the development area, that's a plus," Robert states. "By eliminating the need to write scripts for our scheduled tasks, we can focus our IT resources on our core outdoor advertising business. We have more time for operations, which makes our IT organization a lot nimbler."

The ActiveBatch Integrated Jobs Library Drag-and-Drop Workflow Designer



ActiveBatch Event Triggers



With ActiveBatch in place, Lamar Advertising is able to use templated steps for virtually every scheduled job. By no longer writing scripts, developers can quickly debug and maintain the existing workflows they created in-house, as well as easily create and implement new jobs. "We've made heavy use of the Integrated Jobs Library, which has given us a lot more time back that we used to spend creating and maintaining scripts," Kirchem says. "We've also benefitted from variable constraints to improve processes".

"Today with ActiveBatch we run approximately 10 to 12 thousand jobs a day with a **99% success rate.**"

- Edgar Kirchem, MIS Operations Manager, Lamar



Lamar Advertising IT Automation Success Story

In order to manage the high volume of jobs Lamar executes, the Operations team makes use of ActiveBatch's built-in Execution Queues. Kirchem says, "Using ActiveBatch queues has greatly improved job performance." An execution queue is one type of ActiveBatch queue where jobs waiting for execution on a specific machine reside. Because execution queues point to the system with the agent installed on it, if the machine that the job needs to run on changes, the change occurs in one place only – the queue property. As a result, when the machine changes, the user does not have to change many jobs, but rather just the queue's "machine" property, saving organizations time and minimizing manual updates.

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Conclusion

With ActiveBatch, Lamar has achieved improved functionality and ease of use. "ActiveBatch handles the complexity in our environment very well, without limitation," says Kirchem.

Looking towards the future, Kirchem finds now that the organization has been using ActiveBatch for roughly 5 years, they are taking the time to reassess their automation strategy and improve their current environment. "Now that we've got everything converted into ActiveBatch, it's more of a case of cleaning things up and undoing some of the messes we've made to make things more efficient," says Kirchem.

Expanding Product Knowledge with Training & Support

Several members of Lamar's IT team have attended various ActiveBatch training courses over the years, including ActiveBatch Boot Camp, Operator Course, and Advanced Course. Kirchem himself attended both the ActiveBatch Boot Camp and the Advanced Course. He says, "The training courses are very helpful. When I first started, they reduced the learning curve and got me up on my feet very quickly."

In addition to learning more about how to use ActiveBatch during training, Kirchem reports Advanced Systems Concepts' Platinum support has served Lamar well over the years. "ASCI's Support services have always delivered pretty timely responses and served us well."



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