

ActiveBatch®

Customer IT Automation Success Story

PrimeSource Builds a Brighter SAP Future with ActiveBatch



PRIME SOURCE
BUILDING PRODUCTS, INC.

Company: PrimeSource

Industry: Building Materials & Wholesale Distribution

Customer Site: Irving, Texas, United States

Brief Company Overview:

PrimeSource is one of the largest distributors of building materials in North America and the largest purveyor of fasteners in the world. Founded in 1938, today PrimeSource has the leading distribution network in the industry, with over 35 distribution centers and 1,200 employees across the US, Canada, and the Caribbean. In order to support the needs of its vast distribution network, PrimeSource's IT team heavily relies on ActiveBatch Workload Automation and Job Scheduling to build end-to-end workflows across SAP and non-SAP systems.

SUCCESS STORY HIGHLIGHTS



- Challenges with Legacy Systems Expose Need for Enterprise-Wide Automation Solution
- Certified SAP Integration Puts ActiveBatch Ahead of the Competition
- Integrated Jobs Library Orchestrates Key Business Processes
- Alerting & Monitoring Capabilities Save Time & Resources
- SAP Integration Increases IT Productivity and Minimizes Revenue Loss from Invoicing

The Challenge: Legacy Systems Slowing Down IT

Founded in 1938, PrimeSource is the largest purveyor of fasteners in the world and one of the largest distributors of building materials in North America, with over 35 distribution centers and 1,200 employees across the US, Canada, and the Caribbean. As PrimeSource's business expanded over the years, the IT team was encountering problems incorporating new technologies with an existing array of legacy systems. The company's 20-year old legacy ERP system wasn't able to keep up with changing business needs and was slowing down Operations. The IT team needed a tightly integrated ERP system that would reduce delivery to invoice time and increase agility. As a result, the IT team decided to implement SAP as its new ERP system.

Around this time PrimeSource was also migrating to a more Windows-based platform, but was finding that its IBM Tivoli Scheduling solution wasn't going to work well with its new SAP ERP system and the new Windows environment.

Matt Sullivan, BI Manager at PrimeSource, joined PrimeSource in 2011 as the Senior Data Warehouse Solution Architect just as the company had entered the beginning stages of its SAP implementation. As implementation problems began springing up, it became clear to Sullivan that it was not going to be cost effective to migrate Tivoli objects to work within the SAP system.

"We were moving off of the old mainframe platform that we had been running Tivoli on and we were in a tough spot because we didn't know how we would be able to run jobs moving forward in the new environment. We needed something on the ERP side of things as well as on the BI side," says Sullivan.

Beginning the Search for Enterprise-Wide Automation

Realizing that without the proper automation tool, PrimeSource wouldn't be able to get the true benefits from its SAP investment, Sullivan brought the issue to the CIO's attention that an enterprise automation solution was needed. The CIO then tasked Sullivan with finding an enterprise solution that would solve their SAP automation issues.

"We have a lot of disparate systems, both inside and outside of SAP. We needed something to string that all together," says Sullivan.

When Sullivan began his search for an enterprise automation solution, he identified three primary requirements:

1. Automation for PrimeSource's data warehousing environment, specifically SAP Business Objects Data Services (BODS)
2. Automation for SAP NetWeaver processes
3. Windows-platform scheduling compatibility

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Although Sullivan had looked at two other competitive solutions, he decided to go with ActiveBatch.

“ActiveBatch met our needs in terms of its certified integration with SAP NetWeaver and BODS, its pricing, and its cross-platform flexibility. It fit very elegantly into our Windows-centric environment, allowing us to do things like monitor different services on different servers and automatically restart jobs if they go down.”

Solution: ActiveBatch Workload Automation and Job Scheduling

Today, the IT Department at PrimeSource consists of roughly 35 people, of which six are ActiveBatch users. The primary ActiveBatch group users are the BI/Data Warehousing Team led by Sullivan, the NetWeaver/ECC team, which oversees the SAP/ERP side of business, the in-house application development team, and the database administration team.

In terms of their SAP footprint, PrimeSource has implemented SAP on the ERP side with NetWeaver, which the company uses for tasks like inventory management and invoicing, as well as on the Data Services side for Business Objects (BOBJ) and Data Services processes like nightly data warehousing and reporting.

Achieving True Cost Savings with ActiveBatch's SAP Integration

PrimeSource's first implementation of ActiveBatch began with automating data warehousing processes. Sullivan says, “We bought a solution from SAP called Rapid Marts, which consists of using BOBJ and Data Services as an ETL tool. The process we had been running before ActiveBatch was very cumbersome and took several hours. When we put that process into ActiveBatch, we were able to make it as modular as we wanted, running things in parallel which cut the processing time down from 9 ½ hours before ActiveBatch to just 1 hour with ActiveBatch.”

After the success ActiveBatch delivered to the data warehousing team, Sullivan talked with the ECC Team Manager to expand ActiveBatch use on the NetWeaver side. According to Sullivan, the IT department needed something to integrate processes between SAP ECC and

BODS. Since BODS was a solution SAP purchased, BODS and ECC are loosely coupled, meaning they are not fully integrated with each other, which makes it harder to manage dependencies and kick off end-to-end workflows between them. PrimeSource was struggling with a way to manage these dependencies and pass critical data from one system to the other.

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PrimeSource found that with ActiveBatch's comprehensive SAP integration for BODS and NetWeaver, the IT team was better able to automate and manage dependencies between SAP systems, as well as outside of SAP to other applications and technologies. Oftentimes, the BI team has to manage processes such as data warehousing or database backups that are not actually in SAP, but must run in conjunction with SAP at a certain time. “It's a lot easier managing dependencies in ActiveBatch,” says Sullivan. “We have some in-house apps that require data but can't get that data until it is running in SAP, so being able to coordinate all of that in ActiveBatch is important to us,” says Sullivan.

Integrated Jobs Library Delivers End-to-End SAP Automation

PrimeSource's ECC team primarily works in NetWeaver to do things like inventory management, procurement, and general ledger accounting. In order to orchestrate these processes, the IT team relies heavily on the Integrated Jobs Library. "We exclusively use the Jobs Library. In terms of the NetWeaver extension, we use Job Steps like "Change Variant, Create Variant, Get Child Job Status, Get Job Status, Login," says Sullivan.

Before ActiveBatch, the team was relying on manual tracking and the native SAP scheduler to run jobs. However, now that the team has been using ActiveBatch for roughly four years, all SAP jobs are created and monitored in ActiveBatch.

"With ActiveBatch, everything is exposed all in one place. We can coordinate between four different teams and put dependencies where they are needed, while having one single viewing pane to monitor all of our dependent processes. We rely on ActiveBatch to keep things coordinated and get data to the right place at the right time," says Sullivan.



ActiveBatch Automates Business Critical SAP Invoicing

As one of the largest distributors in the world, invoicing customers is a frequent and vital business operation for PrimeSource. Specifically, PrimeSource relies on electronic

invoicing, or Electronic Data Interchanges (EDI), to invoice vendors and customers. EDI invoicing is used between SAP systems and external systems to enable vendors to transfer invoice information electronically.

Sullivan says, "It's very important that these orders go out. Before ActiveBatch, there was a lot of revenue loss in the billing process because dependencies would fail or invoices would fall through the cracks, resulting in customers not being billed on time or deliveries not being made on time."

Before ActiveBatch, PrimeSource had no automated way of running these processes. "It was very fragile. We were running a very manually intensive process that was not easy to maintain nor was it easy to identify issues when they occurred," adds Sullivan.

Using ActiveBatch, PrimeSource built a series of jobs around existing programs in SAP, linking its EDI software to SAP, which input the data into SAP in order to create invoices. "Now we have a lot of control over the process. ActiveBatch identifies issues when they occur, so other than checking for alerts in the morning, there's no manual work at all," says Sullivan.

This resulted in true time and costs savings for PrimeSource, "before ActiveBatch, this was taking 20 hours a week, now it's completely automated, saving us that time for higher level projects". Additionally, as a result of using ActiveBatch's comprehensive alerting capabilities, Sullivan reports PrimeSource's customer billing times have improved, reducing much of the loss of revenue and penalties that can occur when larger customers are not billed on time.

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Transforming Data Warehousing Automation

On the data warehousing side, Sullivan's BI team uses BODS to coordinate all nightly processes to ensure reliable data movement and transformations are performed. For example, Sullivan's BI team needs to extract data from SAP on a regular basis, so the team built a data extract flow using Job Steps from ActiveBatch's BODS Extension. Using the "RunBatchJob" step in ActiveBatch, the BI team sets parameters and pulls from the target database to execute the SAP ABAP data flow.

The team has also made use of ActiveBatch's Web Services Environment, which allows developers to manage applications, objects, and information across the business using ActiveBatch's native advanced scheduling capabilities. "Our development team has built an internal self-service portal that enables users to retrieve invoices based on certain parameters such as a specific date range or vendor. Once the user selects certain options, an ActiveBatch job will kick off and pass those parameters to a Data Services job that then goes into ECC to extract the data and put it into a DB2 table on the backend. Once this is done, the screen refreshes, displaying the information the user requested," says Sullivan. Using this system, users can more efficiently monitor payments to vendors.

Alerting & Monitoring Capabilities Create a More Streamlined Environment

When asked what the biggest benefit of ActiveBatch has been, Sullivan cheerfully replies, "Well, now I get to sleep at night". Before ActiveBatch, PrimeSource had no way of monitoring processes, especially overnight processes. "We're a very small IT shop. We don't have a third shift and a lot of things need to run overnight. When we were first going live with the SAP environment, things weren't going well. I had to wake up at two or three in the morning to make sure things didn't fail and if they did fail, it was a nine-hour process to get it started from the top again".

Using ActiveBatch's alerting capabilities, PrimeSource has streamlined its environment so it can automatically

restart workflows at the point of failure rather than starting the job chain all the way from the beginning. So if something fails on the second to last job, instead of having to start all the way at the beginning of the chain, ActiveBatch can start the workflow at the second to last job, saving users time and computing resources.

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"This has introduced more reliability in our processes," says Sullivan.

PrimeSource also makes heavy use of ActiveBatch's alerting capabilities. "We primarily do a lot of email alerting here. I use it extensively. I have email alerts for the BODS team so that if one of our jobs is down it actually tells us it went down and sends us the log file. That was something Advanced Systems Concepts' Support team helped us implement based on Best Practices".



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Overall, Sullivan has been very pleased with Advanced Systems Concepts' Support. "I've been doing data warehousing for 30 years, so it's a very pleasant surprise to buy a software product that meets and exceeds your expectations. I rarely have a problem putting solutions into ActiveBatch. It's easy to install, easy to configure, and the sessions I've done with the Technical Support team have made it very easy to get things up and running in production. At one point in time, I was having issues with the BODS modules and ASCI wrote a hot fix for it, which was then integrated into the current release at the time."



Built-in Change Management Provides Reliability Between Environments

Outside of SAP, PrimeSource uses ActiveBatch in managing changes across environments/departments. According to Sullivan, PrimeSource has a full blown test environment and an administrator who manages that test environment so that when people want to migrate objects into production, they use ActiveBatch's built-in change management tool. "We use it for all of our production migration needs and for refreshing production down to our Development and Test environments."

ActiveBatch's change management system ensures a highly reliable and error free approach to synchronizing and managing objects across various environments.

"The software is rock solid; it's always been reliable. I think we've barely tapped into what we could do with it."

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Using a visual approach to object comparison, the graphical interface detects object differences and indicates the level of synchronization that needs to be performed.

While Sullivan has been happy with the advantages built-in change management has delivered, he sees room for improvement in the way the IT team supports the product. "We're in the process of building a more distributed but controlled processing environment."

Future Plans with ActiveBatch

Sullivan foresees ActiveBatch meeting PrimeSource's needs and exceeding them in the years to come.

Sullivan says, "The software is rock solid; it's always been reliable. I think we've barely tapped into what we could do with it. I campaign for ActiveBatch as much as possible to the other departments here at PrimeSource."