

First Rate Automates 99% of Data Processes with ActiveBatch's No-Code Approach

What is First Rate?

First Rate is a leading provider of investment performance and client reporting solutions to the wealth management marketplace. With more than two million portfolios measured daily and more than **\$2 trillion** in assets reported on its solution, First Rate is a recognized leader in providing solutions and services built on innovation and excellence.



Success Story Highlights

- First Rate's previous automation solution was becoming unstable, putting the performance of service level agreements (SLAs) at risk.
- First Rate required a powerful solution that could scale as the business expanded.
- ActiveBatch's advanced analytics and reporting tools have enabled First Rate's Managed Hosting team to improve its response times.
- First Rate has developed **99% of its automated data processes with out-of-the-box Job Steps from ActiveBatch.**

Automation is Critical to First Rate's Success

Data processing constitutes a large portion of First Rate's business, receiving raw data from wealth management firms around the world. Each night, automated processes decrypt and prepare that data for processing, performing clean-up and transformation routines before encrypting and loading the data into a business intelligence platform.

First Rate's Managed Hosting team has service level agreements with the firms they're preparing data for. There is no middleman, meaning these firms expect their data to be available by the start of each morning's business. They rely on it.

"Some of our automated jobs take 8 hours to run, so it's difficult when things don't run smoothly and everything gets backed up," explained Jeanne Benson, Senior Operations Manager at First Rate. "That's why it's extremely critical that these jobs run like they're supposed to."

When Vital Business Processes Fail

In 2012, First Rate was relying on legacy automation software to run and manage critical business processes.

"We would have failures pretty frequently in the overnight processing cycle, and the frustration was that there was no logging or error messaging to tell us what the actual issue was to try to resolve it," explained Steve Norwood, Client Service Manager at First Rate.

"The automation software just stopped functioning overnight, which caused all of our overnight cycle processes to fail," continued Norwood. "When we came in the next morning, we could not get the system back up and running. We had to basically provision a new server and reinstall the software."

First Rate's Managed Hosting team had already discussed migrating to a new information technology (IT) automation solution, and as overnight process issues began impacting their SLAs, finding a replacement became a top priority.

Why First Rate Chose ActiveBatch

First Rate's primary goal was to find an automation solution that would not have "constant catastrophic failures." What they needed was a stable automation environment that could handle large, complex workloads.

This meant finding a powerful, flexible automation solution that could help drive First Rate's growth. They needed much more than a standard job scheduler.

"There was very little log information to tell us anything about the jobs that ran in our previous automation tool," explained Norwood.

Without sufficient log information to understand what was causing failures, the Managed Hosting team was taking much longer to resolve issues, impacting the SLAs they held with First Rate's clients.

First Rate's Managed Hosting team knew their next automation solution had to provide in-depth analytics and reporting tools. The Managed Hosting team was also planning for growth. First Rate's business was quickly expanding, increasing Managed Hosting's daily workloads. They needed an IT automation solution that would scale with their business and easily handle high volumes of jobs.

"We actually called a couple of people who were using ActiveBatch and talked about 'how many jobs are you guys running per day' and 'what's your workload like,'" said Norwood.

"We weren't running that many jobs and we were having all kinds of issues. So, we talked and said, okay, these guys are running thousands and thousands of jobs a day and ActiveBatch isn't even blinking an eye.

"We knew we needed something that was going to be able to grow with us. That is hugely important: We need a tool we know we can rely on now, that we can rely on in the future."

Migrating to a New IT Automation Solution

Advanced Systems Concepts, Inc. (ASCI) offers automated migration tools and services to companies moving to ActiveBatch. With proven conversion methodologies and consultations, ASCI is able to ensure smooth and reliable migrations.

The majority of First Rate's automated workflows are the overnight batch jobs that process customer data. During the migration, First Rate worked with an ASCI support technician who was already familiar with First Rate's needs.

"We were able to send one of our automation jobs over to the support technician and he was able to recreate that job in ActiveBatch," explained Norwood.



“It was hugely beneficial to us... because then we could walk through the ActiveBatch steps and understand how things from our old system would work in the new system.”

The Managed Hosting team installed its first ActiveBatch Job Scheduler and Execution Agents in 2012. They stayed in contact with ASCI Support over the next several weeks, leveraging ASCI's online learning materials and extensive knowledgebase.

“ASCI Support is very responsive and has helped us resolve issues very quickly. The support is, in all honesty, the best we have ever encountered,” said Norwood. “The knowledgebase is also one of the most comprehensive support libraries out there.”

Name	ID	State	Execution Time	Duration	Exit Code	Exit Code Description	Queue	Tags
End of Day Run	13166	Succeeded (1x)	10/16/2018 11:30:04 AM (+21 s)	0:20 min	100 (0x00000064)		MainQueue	
Complete Process	0	Not Run					GQ1	
Copy File -- File Operations	13174	Not Run (After restart) (1x)	10/16/2018 11:29:58 AM	< 0:01 min			EQ2	
Delete File -- File Operation	13176	Succeeded	10/16/2018 11:30:10 AM	< 0:01 min	100 (0x00000064)		EQ2	

Supercharging the IT Automation Environment

ActiveBatch is a powerful, scalable IT automation solution packed with features and capabilities that provide users with unprecedented visibility and control. For example, ActiveBatch's intuitive GUI offers over a dozen views for analyzing data and workflow progress, from high-level overviews to detailed, in-depth analyses.

The ActiveBatch Instances View, which provides a comprehensive list of all instances for a defined period, is often the first view that operators check on a day-to-day basis. First Rate uses the Instances View to quickly understand the statuses of their overnight cycles and to quickly access detailed log information as needed.

“In the morning, that's the first thing we look at: what has actually had an issue overnight? **The Instances View gives us a really quick view of what we need to focus on. And then obviously there's all kinds of information you can dig into in ActiveBatch to find out even more,**” said Norwood.

First Rate also uses ActiveBatch Alerts to quickly and reliably notify users of certain events or issues, significantly reducing response times and improving SLAs.

“**Having the ability to set alerts for specific things that could happen and then have that alert go to a specific group—sometimes we push them to an email group, or we push them to our overnight support team—and then to be able to dig into the error logging to figure out what's wrong. All of that is hugely beneficial.**”

ActiveBatch proactively monitors workflows and, depending on an organization's needs, will take appropriate steps when a workflow overruns, underruns, displays exit codes, fails, succeeds, or is in danger of breaching an SLA. ActiveBatch's Alert Objects tool can be used to trigger remedial workflows, generate event logs, and send notifications via email, Skype, SMS, and more.

The ActiveBatch Integrated Jobs Library

ActiveBatch was designed for both operators and developers, providing a suite of capabilities for designing, monitoring, and managing automated workflows across the organization.

The ActiveBatch Integrated Jobs Library, for example, offers hundreds of prebuilt Job Steps and integrations that allow users to build dependable workflows to incorporate data and dependencies from multiple other technologies.

First Rate uses SQL Server Integration Services (SSIS) packages to load data into their middleware, a task that is critical to the overnight cycles First Rate runs for its customers. In order to simplify and optimize these business-critical processes, the Managed Hosting team has developed end-to-end workflows using ActiveBatch's out-of-the-box Job Steps for SQL Server.

"ActiveBatch even has an SSIS Jobs Library Job, so we've been able to run those packages through that tool as part of our workflow. SSIS has to be part of our workflows so I'm not sure how we would've gotten around that [without ActiveBatch]," explained Norwood.

“For building a job we're just using the Jobs Library. We only run from the ActiveBatch scheduler, through the GUI. 99% are the Job Steps from the [Jobs] library.”

Empowering First Rate's Developers

When building or editing workflows in ActiveBatch, First Rate's Managed Hosting team leverages several capabilities that streamline development, save time, and reduce manual errors.

With ActiveBatch's Reference Functionality, a single change to a Template Job automatically passes down to all jobs that reference it, accelerating workflow development and simplifying maintenance. Jobs can even be copied to create new Template Jobs.

“You can imagine, if I can't copy a job and I have to recreate it from scratch, that's just more technician time spent when they could be doing something else,” said Norwood.

Job creation used to take **"twice as long"**, explained Steve Schneider, System Administrator and Automation Specialist with First Rate. **“With ActiveBatch when you copy a job it becomes its own object. So, you copy a job, go in and change a few things, and you're done.”**

ActiveBatch is a trigger-based automation system that allows users to automatically run jobs based on emails, file events, the completion status of preceding jobs, and much more.

Before moving to ActiveBatch, First Rate lacked the ability to trigger jobs based on external conditions. Instead, the Managed Hosting team had to run additional jobs to monitor completion statuses, just so they would know when to manually run a workflow that was waiting for a dependency.

"Our jobs became very cumbersome because of that. They were very hard to manage and read," explained Norwood. "In ActiveBatch, it's all contained within the job; you just add a constraint. You have a lot of Boolean-type things you can do. It's really pretty impressive."

ActiveBatch supports a variety of constraints (dependencies), including calendar and time constraints, variable constraints, resource constraints, and more.

First Rate, which has many clients with unique calendars in time zones around the world, has found ActiveBatch's calendar constraints to be particularly useful. Prior to ActiveBatch, First Rate did not have the ability to schedule jobs around holidays, causing customers to receive completion notices on days when the jobs weren't even supposed to be running.

“The constraints features in ActiveBatch are pretty incredible; there's a lot of flexibility there,” said Norwood. “The scheduling in ActiveBatch is very flexible, too—very granular. The ability to add calendars and holiday calendars was something we did not have in our previous automation solution. That's definitely another thing that has allowed us to customize these jobs to the specific client needs.”

ActiveBatch also supports Revision History, allowing users to roll back changes with a single click. “That tool is amazing. If you make a change that doesn't work and you need to go back, you just click on the previous one and click restore and you're good to go.”

First Rate is Advancing Its Automation

“Our only goal is to automate everything; as much as we can, we want it automated. If we can think of something, there's usually a way to do it in ActiveBatch,” said Norwood. “There's a lot of things we haven't even touched yet that we need to dig into to see if we can make our processes even more efficient.”

Prior to ActiveBatch, First Rate lacked both auditing and documentation capabilities. When a change was made to a script or workflow, they were forced to spend time researching why a job was working a certain way.

“When you write your system documents, they go stale a lot of the time because nobody gets in there and actively updates them,” explained Benson. “[Our development team] has created a process that if something changes on our system —if a client moves to a different reporting server, for example— ActiveBatch is sweeping through and updating the document automatically for us.”

Today, First Rate has drastically reduced the amount of time spent troubleshooting by leveraging ActiveBatch's auditing and documentation features and have developed specialized documentation capabilities within ActiveBatch.

First Rate is going to grow its business, opening new offices in the UK and Hong Kong. They'll be sticking with ActiveBatch in order to scale their IT automation environments.

“We've probably hit maybe 1% of what [ActiveBatch] can do,” added Schneider.

“If it's digital, ActiveBatch can do it. We know this is a tool that we're going to be able to build, that we can go as far as we want to go and it's going to be able to handle our needs.”

ABOUT ACTIVEBATCH

ActiveBatch offers a powerful automation engine, a rich library of integrations, and an intuitive workflow designer for improved performance and end-to-end visibility of processes.

ABOUT ADVANCED SYSTEMS CONCEPTS, INC.

For almost 40 years, ASCI has been developing industry-leading products that help keep IT teams ahead of market trends. With over 2000 customers and a reputation for delivering powerful IT automation tools, ASCI's accomplishments depend on innovation and integrity.

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