



Don Elliott
Sales director

company's vision into account, the system was designed to incorporate all premium-based businesses that process and pay out money at some stage. "In other words, AstraLife is the first step in combining our AstraPen and MedStar products (and a future short-term insurance application) into one product.

Firth's vision of the future is one of consolidation. "We have had years of high commissions paid by the insurance industry – most often without the insured realising how much of each premium went to brokers and agents," he explains. "With the potential for cross subsidisation of these products in the near future, along with greater registrar and ombudsman control in the pipeline, I expect to see someone clamping down on this and a wave of consolidation will follow.

"MIP's mission is to provide one system that will be able to handle all of the components in the insurance field – and AstraLife is the foundation for this all-in-one system."

The system will not require a new training programme for users. Dunbar says each component will speak the language of that

industry and behave as a stand-alone system, but work from a single data source and offer an overall picture of the insured's status.

Based on Progress Software's Dynamics development environment (which was developed by MIP), AstraLife is a web-based application that allows all data collected via a browser to be captured immediately into the corporate system. "We have even included an SMS function that insurance companies can use, for example, to inform clients of their claim status or answer a simple query," Selesnik adds.

TRY TO GET RID OF US

As good as the software is, the company does not leave clients alone after the software is delivered. Apart from installation and training, there is also support. For AstraPen, Walsh says one or two MIP staff members are posted on site permanently to make sure the system runs correctly – at no additional cost. Someone is also assigned to the client's offices from the MedStar side.

"We are regulars at our clients' offices," adds Elliott. He says MIP account managers



Claudia Walsh
AstraPen project manager

meet their clients on a weekly basis. Any issues are logged and fixed during the week and a report-back is presented at the next weekly meeting. It's a simple, but effective process.

AstraLife is different, explains Selesnik, however. "We do not leave the office."

The new system architecture simply makes use of Internet based technology to remotely manage the software. "This includes remote installation, updates and any troubleshooting that may be necessary," he remarks. "We only supply operators to run the system."

WHEN YOU'RE HOT

The second area of expertise for MIP is bespoke development. "Since development is our forte, it makes sense for us to also focus on creating applications specifically for customers," says Firth. Possibly the best-known application the company has produced was known as Astra2, a development environment MIP designed from scratch.

In a deal that hit local headlines, it was taken over by Progress in 2001, renamed Dynamics, and incorporated as Progress's development tool. It is freely downloadable from the web and is currently being made available to Progress' 100 000 user base worldwide.

Progress is working on further development of the tool, with the help of MIP staff.

Mark Davies, Dynamics Team project manager, says the local development team is currently finalising Dynamics 2.0 Service Pack 1 and will be launching version 2.1 in the third quarter. "About 70 percent of what is delivered with Dynamics is produced in South Africa, although we only constitute 30 percent of the developers on the project," he says. The company has also sent consultants out to various



Michael Botha
MD of Auto-Mate

users around the world, including Progress, to train them on the Dynamics platform.

Already the internal MIP developers are starting to use Dynamics for developing other projects – such as AstraLife. "Dynamics permits users to develop an application's business logic separately and then deploy it as a GUI application or a Internet application," Davies adds. A WAP interface will be included in the future.

JUST THE BARE NECESSITIES

As a development company, all the MIP staff know how complex development and customisation projects can be. Even so, the company believes customisation is the only way for companies to make a profit and stay ahead of competitors.

"The common opinion among IT experts that customising bought applications is a no-no, because the applications are built upon so-called best practices," warns Firth. "I disagree. If we all follow best practices, where will we find competitive advantage and make money?"

"Look at companies that are making a profit and decide who is following best practices

methodologies. It's when entrepreneurs drop the tried-and-tested formulas and do things differently that they find an advantage and succeed."

It is for this reason that MIP created Dynamax. According to group solutions director, Johan Meyer, Dynamax is a collection of core business practices all companies need to use – essential financial and business components in a complete package.

"We have created a component framework for companies to run on," he says. Dynamax allows companies to fast track their development – it is not a rapid application development (RAD) tool, but reduces the development work that needs to be done by providing all the generic stuff out of the box and already working.

"With Dynamax, about 60 percent of the development work is already done for you," Meyer adds. "Companies only need to add the value-add that makes them different."

MIP is already using Dynamax to redevelop its own applications, starting with its recent joint venture with Dimension Data to re-develop Auto-Mate, an automotive dealer management product.



Mark Davies
Dynamics Team project manager

Meyer has three focus areas for Dynamax: to sell it; to train customers how to use it efficiently; and to fast track software development and implementation using the system. "Our worldwide training is at the customer's premises, on the customer's products. By the second training day, customers are already writing their own software and gaining immediate advantage from the process."

A HOBBY THAT PAYS

The MIP team is not made up of nine to five workers. Firth notes that most of the company is made up of programmers or ex-programmers and what they do is a passion for them. Across the MIP and Auto-Mate teams comprising 160 people, over 100 are programmers. "It's like a hobby, we do it because we want to," he states.

This, according to Elliott, is another reason why MIP customers always get what they are promised. If a project manager is not a technical person, at least one senior person in the team will have a technical background. "We know what we are promising and if we say an application can be delivered in three months, it's because we know it can be done – we do not invent short project times to try and make a sale and then make excuses."

It is also this passion that gives MIP a negligible staff turnover. "We all are passionately customer centric and stick to the markets we know."

A market MIP did not know, until recently, is the automotive dealer network. Nevertheless, at the end of 2002, Auto-Mate owner Dimension Data and MIP formed a joint venture to assume mutual and equal responsibility for Auto-Mate, the leading auto-