

Expert opinion

What future for your AS/400?

By Nicolas Odet, Director of Services, Marketing and Communication, Hardis Group

After 25 years of loyal service, the IBM AS/400 platform is still very much present in all industries, from large SMEs to key accounts, who praise its reliability. Conserve or migrate: the future of the AS/400 seems to be a black or white issue. In fact, the development possibilities are many.

AS/400: I'm reliable therefore I am!

Are you still using applications running on AS/400? This is proof that the reputation of reliability that goes before it is not overrated: for 25 years, it has been keeping SME and key account IS departments happy. In the 1990s, software publishers got it right when they systematically proposed solutions on this platform.

But this was without taking into account the digital revolution. In the early 2000s, these technologies that were still called "new" went further than IS departments, extending to the general public, along with "windows" and "user friendly" interfaces. With its legendary reliability, your AS/400 was then faced with the latest technologies: Windows, Unix, etc., without being totally excluded from the information system. But the scarcity of skills and increasingly strong pressure made you start doubting: should I part with my AS/400?

L'AS/400: an isolated technology in the IS?

For many years, critics of the IBM platform have not beat about the bush. There is no shortage of critics, ready even to deviate slightly from the truth in order to boost competing platforms. The AS/400 is mainly accused of being isolated within the information system and of having two-color interfaces. And its defenders, of living in the past and of resting on laurels that they now believe to have wilted.

But the reality is quite different. Over time, the AS/400 has opened up and developed. The platform is now able to seamlessly integrate into any information system, including service-oriented architectures (SOA) or virtualized architectures. AS/400 applications can also accommodate up to date interfaces, identical to those used with Java, .Net and PHP platforms, in line with user expectations.

The scarcity of AS/400 skills

Beyond the technical aspects, it is now human resources that pose the greatest risk to AS/400 applications. You know better than anyone: the vast majority of your in-house specialists are coming to the end of their career. And it's becoming increasingly difficult to recruit new skills. It must be said that most young developers have been brought up with graphical programming interfaces, such as .Net or Java. So when you start talking to them about AS/400...

Yet solutions do exist. And contrary to what some consulting firms claim they do not systematically involve immediately ditching AS/400. But in most cases, they require it to change.

Separating the wheat from the chaff

Before making any decisions, you should first determine whether your AS/400 application still meets your business needs. If the answer is no, then that's the end of the matter: a complete re-development or implementation of a software package is required. If the answer is yes, you need to analyze the risks and determine what needs to be maintained and / or changed. As with any application, programs developed on AS/400 are alive: they have experienced many changes over time, including the integration of new features as business needs change.

Whatever the application layer, solutions to avoid a "big bang" replacement do exist. For the MMI (front office), a modern graphical interface can be developed to provide better user ergonomics. For the business layer, a contract for third-party application maintenance may be considered to change the application. Finally, for platforms (systems and databases), outsourcing infrastructure management is a good solution when there are no longer adequate in-house skills.

Prepare the future of your AS/400 by changing smoothly

Depending on the needs and context of each company, it is also possible to combine one or more of these solutions to consolidate the existing situation and allow time to prepare the future with confidence.

In all cases, it is essential for the IS department to overhaul all the features, and determine those which are strategic and those which are secondary. Once this first inventory has been made, the IS department can decide which functions (or processes) can be managed by a software package, or conversely those that must be maintained on the platform, or ported to another environment. This work may ultimately lead you to abandon your AS/400. But as part of long-term thinking, without risking the gross errors of making a hasty change.

About Nicolas Odet

Nicolas Odet joined Hardis Group in 2000 and successively held the positions of Head of Sales and Marketing in the New Technologies Skills department, Director of the Infrastructure and Facilities Management Department from 2006 to 2008, and finally Director of Services, Marketing and communication since 2009.

As a member of the executive committee since 2008, he helps to define the group's strategy and its operational implementation. In particular, he led the transformation of Hardis Group's offering to cloud computing.

Prior to joining Hardis Group, Nicolas Odet held the position of business engineer at IBM (systems and storage division) and Sagem (network and optical fiber solutions).

Nicolas Odet graduated from Grenoble Ecole de Management in 1998.

About Hardis Group

Hardis Group was created in 1984. It is both a software publisher and an IT services company. Ever since it was created, the company has built growth in a resolutely different way, based on pragmatism and the core values of local presence and a strong commitment to both customers and employees. The founding directors still run the company, 25% of employees are shareholders, and all the personnel is based in France.

Hardis Group focuses on seven major sectors: infrastructure and facilities management, development and Third-Party Application Maintenance (TPAM), consulting and project

owner support, business intelligence, logistics and transport (Reflex solutions), development tools (Adelia Studio), and payroll outsourcing (Saphyr software).

As a software publisher, Hardis Group is capable of integrating its own solutions and can also call on the services of a network of partners. Its consultants are experts in high-quality IT project methodologies (such as ITIL and CMMI).

Hardis Group posted turnover figures of €53 million in 2011. To date, the Group has more than 2,500 customers and employs 620 people. Its head office is located in Grenoble, with five other branches in Lyon, Paris, Lille, Nantes and Rennes.

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