

## Sherrill Furniture Company – Leapfrogging Several IT Generations in a Single Bound

30 Year-Old RPG Program on IBM AS/400's at heart of IT make-over that will propel efficiencies and cut cycle time in half

*October 2006* – Hickory, North Carolina – Sherrill Furniture Company's focus for over 50 years has been keenly on making the highest quality furniture available. That single-mindedness has rewarded both their customers and the company. Sherrill grew to nine divisions in recent years, each capturing market share amid a renewed demand for the exacting standards of workmanship that are its hallmark. But like many manufacturing operations, the company's Information Technology group didn't change out systems technologies on a whim. Instead, Sherrill Management needed a crisp business rationale for adopting new technologies, and it had better include a strong cost justification.

### Article ROI

#### One Manufacturer's Approach To

- Re-architecting Legacy Systems to support today's demands
- Balancing IT workload and new system development
- Staying focused on adding to Profitability and Productivity

Well the reasons to review the IT infrastructure steadily grew over the years, and at the same time Sherrill's IT staff became busier than ever accommodating newly acquired divisions. Since the company was well adept at running operations on IBM midrange equipment with their 1970's-vintage custom RPG program, each new division received their own implementation of the same. Division-specific needs were then programmed into their edition of the core program to be responsive to the business unit.

But the complexity and limitations of the approach were beginning to catch up with Sherrill. Maintenance to the software on the nine increasingly divergent code bases had become onerous. Consolidating data from across divisions was unwieldy. The IT workload had come to choke-hold proportions.



Making matters worse, the business demands were increasing. The number of custom fabrics, finishes and options had mushroomed. Business units needed more information with a quicker turn. Identifying the true cost of a custom piece was impossible. Accounting didn't have enough tools to improve raw financial performance. Competitive pressures pushed for faster manufacturing.

Sherrill Chief Financial Officer Mike Powers thoroughly understood the corner he had been painted into. “You get a bit of a sinking feeling when things start catching up with you, and you haven’t yet got a plan in place,” Mike admits. He knew he needed help to identify the right way out. So after a few deep breaths, step one was bringing in Frank Mascarenhas, a consultant with a strong background in the kind of systems Sherrill was immersed in. Frank turned out to be a positive addition to the team to lead the initial research and review project for Sherrill. Mike found Frank to be well tuned to the key drivers and needs of the organization and they went to work. After months of review and research, Mike and Frank had begun to map a route for Sherrill.



The cornerstone to the strategy lay in adopting the Application Development environment from LANSAs to build Windows and Web interfaces into the iSeries data. The Visual LANSAs product had taken an undeniable lead amongst the application development products reviewed, scoring points for power, flexibility, robustness and platform independence. LANSAs was clearly capable of generating rich Windows or Web-based applications from their existing iSeries data sets, allowing comprehensive manipulation to accomplish important new functionality, all in a fraction of the time a comprehensive traditional application re-write would require.

---

**“There’s a serious sinking feeling you get after enough years of doing nothing”**

**Mike Powers, Sherrill CFO on Envision Accelerator**

---

Slick demos aside, Sherrill worried about the realities of getting there that the presentations tend to gloss over. They knew, as excitingly powerful as Visual LANSAs’s capabilities were, that getting a 30-year RPG programmer to become proficient in new tools, even ones as beautifully architected as LANSAs, was just not happening overnight. And no one on staff had anything close to the complete re-engineering experience that they were about to undertake. Finally, as tapped-out as the existing staff was, keeping all of their plates spinning, where would the time and attention come from to embark on this transforming journey?



Sherrill began a detailed search for development expertise that they could contract for assistance. The options ranged between the very expensive, highly experienced teams and more affordable but shallower resources that fail to inspire confidence. And as always with consulting engagements, there is the sense of the unknown – whether solutions will spring forth as quickly, productively and comprehensively as you'd envision.

Then they found LANSA partner Surround Technologies. The Surround team brought forward even more than Sherrill had imagined. With a core development group together and programming in LANSA for 15 years, they came to think that Surround Technologies had not only sufficient expertise, but probably should be regarded as *the* authority in LANSA development. In fact, Surround was the first company to release a Visual LANSA-developed application into production. And all of those years of application development experience showed through, even in the early conversations.



---

**“Surround’s Envision Accelerator is like fitting a Warp Drive  
Into the Starship of Lansa”**

**Lee Paul, Surround CEO on Envision Accelerator**

---

The Surround team soon showed themselves to be oriented towards solving the business problems in an as-effective-as-possible manner. In fact, closer examination of Surround’s status as a software developer in their own right, showed just how embedded this was in their entire approach.

Surround Technologies has grown into a formidable developer of LANSA specific Tool-Sets, Reusable Application Modules, and complete LANSA-based Applications under their Envision brand. Surround’s growing software catalog sprang forth from their years of custom application development, finding that many efforts were redundant processes that could themselves be pre-packaged and re-used. The method not only saved development time further, but improved application reliability as these components were extensively tested. Surround’s centerpiece product, their Envision Accelerator, is a LANSA Tool-Set collection of components, programs and code-generating wizards that takes LANSA’s already impressive programmer productivity gains and powers it to a new level.

Surround's CEO, Lee Paul, offers the following summation, "I hate to sound like the proverbial Trekkie, but the analogy that seems to fit best is that getting LANSAs is like taking delivery of a brand new Starship. Installing Surround's Envision Accelerator is like fitting a Warp Drive into it. It's that kind of "Next Generation" technology, if you'll excuse the pun. Then, just in case piloting a Starship is new to your staff, we can man the stations with you for your maiden voyage. It all makes for a satisfying and effective deployment."

In case you're thinking that the gushing over Envision Accelerator sounds like hyperbole, Sherrill's Mike Powers would argue with you. "It's absolutely the most productive software we have ever bought, period." he offers. "It easily paid for itself in a just a few weeks, it's that good."

So if the combined consulting expertise and Surround's own additive technology proved alluring, Surround made it an easy choice by working through the process with Sherrill. Moving quickly to define the process the re-engineering effort would take, and breaking it into manageable and defined phases with cost estimates attached, all made the complex project appear less daunting. In the proposal, Surround showed how they could augment Sherrill's taxed staff to accomplish the efforts together.

---

**"It's absolutely the most productive software we have ever bought, period"**

**Mike Powers, Sherrill CFO on Envision Accelerator**

---

Mike and Frank agreed, the partnership with Surround felt right, and moved forward with some initial LANSAs mentoring that confirmed everything. The mentoring effort was so effective – on-the-fly real-time training on their systems – that it was clear that Surround was out to break the traditional consulting model. Mike explains further, "I've never seen consulting resources more definitively expert, and then also adept at and dedicated to real knowledge transfer . . . it made for the most competent training."



Mike began planning the next steps with Surround. Surround would take charge of the overall application and data mapping process, working with the Sherrill team in slow methodical chunks so as not to interrupt the existing workflow. The formula brought together Sherrill's understanding of the existing application and business needs and intertwined Surround's expertise at architecting the new applications. This design phase is the critical juncture in assuring a smooth development project. Mike again offers praise for the skill set Surround brought to the table, "The Surround methodology and user orientation were key . . . their experience showed".



The final payoffs have now come on line as Sherrill released the first modules into production in July, with the system providing Purchase Order, Costing and Receiving functionality. The good planning up front is helping to keep an aggressive rollout on schedule, with more operational capabilities being integrated in through Invoicing, Shipping and Payables. The final phases are expected to be in reach by year-end and will extend to the heart of the manufacturing process, allowing detailed shop floor management of yields, inventory and so many capabilities beyond what the legacy RPG program allowed.

The combination of LANSa with Envision Accelerator produced beautiful Windows applications with no thought required as to laying out a graphical interface. "User acceptance was immediate," Frank shares, "they are Windows apps that look like they could have come from any major publisher." The interface familiarity is helping the immediate productivity gains, Frank is convinced. Coming from 5250 displays, the presentation was always a concern.

---

**"I've never seen consulting resources more definitively expert, and then also adept at and dedicated to real knowledge transfer . . ."**

**Mike Powers, Sherrill CFO on Surround's Consulting**

---

With the deployment fully implemented, Sherrill will see enough added efficiencies from purchasing through manufacturing to cut in half the time it takes to produce custom-ordered furniture. Making that "totally-custom" option more attractive to customers is sure to drive sales again. Along the way, Sherrill will improve yields, reduce inventory, and increase accounting accuracy; all improving total financial performance.

Frank Mascarenhas is more than pleased with the results of the effort and points out what an enormous leap they've made, "We've jumped several generations of technology here, from relatively inflexible green-screen basics, to the most modernized application giving us real-time decision-making capabilities". The ability to easily enhance functionality even further, now that they have such powerful application development tools at hand, is a feature that hasn't even been comprehended yet. "We'll shortly have everything that was on our list," says Frank, "and we have just begun to recognize that there are more things that we could wish for, and they're all very do-able now. Who knows where that will take us? Maybe we'll get another 30 years out of this architecture."

Sherrill CFO Mike Powers sees it all as confirmation of Sherrill's hard-nosed approach to IT systems, "We've always maintained that the computers needed to work for us, not vice versa. I think we've proven that sticking to that has paid off. Our deployment is going to significantly improve the productivity and profitability of the business. And that's what it's supposed to be about, isn't it?"



**SHERRILL FURNITURE** has been manufacturing furniture of the highest quality since the late 1940's. At Sherrill, every piece of furniture is built by hand. Not because they've been doing it that way for over 50 years, but simply because it's still the best way to build a quality piece of furniture. "Hands on" best describes the climate in Sherrill's manufacturing facilities as each piece of furniture is produced under the watchful eyes of the many craftsmen and women while it moves through the factory. Known also for their selection of fabrics, Sherrill's exacting standards of workmanship and exceptional attention to detail assure the very finest upholstery available. For more information, visit [www.SherrillFurniture.com](http://www.SherrillFurniture.com).

**LANSAP** is a leading provider of Application Development software for companies looking to extend the value of their IT infrastructure and create new pathways to grow their business. LANSAP's repository-based architecture improves developer productivity, reduces maintenance costs and supports Web, iSeries, Windows, UNIX and Linux deployments and also serves as the technology foundation for a wide range of applications from its 300 Solution Partners. For nearly two decades, more than 7,000 customers around the world have relied on LANSAP products to help them move to the next level of business performance. For more information, visit [www.LANSAP.com](http://www.LANSAP.com).

**Surround Technologies** is a Software Developer and Consulting firm providing Next-Generation Acceleration of Application Development. Surround allows companies to create beautifully-presented new applications by integrating data from existing, disparate systems with little work, making custom software development now irresistible and less expensive than ill-fitting packaged solutions. By providing better software to end users, they raise their productivity, and by working with existing system investments in a new and easier way, they deliver a phenomenal Return-on-Investment to the corporation. Surround Technologies' Envision products, all built in the LANSAP environment, appeal to companies large and small, and are in use at leading companies like Gannett, Verizon, and General Electric. For more information, visit [www.SurroundTech.com](http://www.SurroundTech.com).