

IPC adapts business lines for interoperability push

The communication software provider is containerizing its trading ecosystem for apps to play nicely with each other.

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Going are the days where capital markets firms expect a trading platform—and any other platform they deal with, for that matter—to be a closed-off system. Instead, banks and asset managers now expect more of these same systems to interact seamlessly with other systems they deal with.

While [interoperability](#) can mean different things to different people, the idea is that banks and asset managers want to move towards a more open ecosystem where different applications can talk to each other.

Speaking on a panel during the recent *WatersTechnology* Innovation Exchange, Kim Prado, global head of client insight, banking, and digital channels technology for RBC Capital Markets, said, “If you’re a platform out there and you’re listening today, I am begging you to create components [that are separated] and simplify our ability to interact with you.”

Prado said she wants to see platforms with containerized applications with options to pick and choose which components she wants to use, rather than having to use the whole system.

This is what IPC Systems, a communications software provider is trying to do. It is building a new containerized ecosystem for its flagship trading communication system, Unigy.

The unified services program, called Agility, is an application platform supported by its Connexus cloud, embedded within Unigy, and powered by Kubernetes open-source infrastructure. Agility can deploy and manage containerized applications.

By building the platform, IPC wants to provide its customers and partners with a place on the IPC network where they can sandbox

applications and embed them within the Unigy trading turret. Agility is linked, but not core to Unigy's development, so containerized applications and customized updates can be made to Unigy without changing the program itself.

Unigy, which currently has more than 110,000 users, aims to provide communication continuity of the back and middle offices, as well as the communication of other regulated users, across one platform. With the addition of Agility, personalized applications can be added to Unigy outside of its routine updates.

"We put an infrastructure in at the customer site, or in a site that we are hosting Unigy for the customer, and then that becomes a way that we can add things more rapidly to the environment," says IPC chief technology officer Tim Carmody.

For example, IPC could add a new tool that ingests data and coordinates directly with Unigy through an API, or it could add a new feature for Unigy itself or something that isn't core to Unigy. The tool could be developed by IPC, one of its partners, or by a customer, and IPC will host it.

The platform, which was developed over the last year, stemmed from conversations with IPC's partners. Carmody says that overall, banks are moving to a managed service or software-as-a-service model, which means that they need fewer engineers and operational staff to validate new applications and servers before they get implemented.

Carmody says he has also noticed an increasing demand from IPC's customers for more integration for traders. "That means pulling technology closer together, doing more data sharing, and implementation of context-sensitive information searches," he says.

IPC is working with desktop interop provider OpenFin to put OpenFin's containers on the IPC turret. A trader will be able to have a touchscreen turret with an OpenFin container on it. "Then inside that open container can be any application that supports OpenFin, and now you can share data between those applications," Carmody says.

IPC is also working with some bond platforms to take information about a bond, such as pricing, and embed it in that container, making it closer

for the trader to reach within one unified system. Carmody isn't able to mention which bond platforms IPC is working with right now.

Playing around

A few years ago, IPC decided to bring Unigy and Connexus closer. Among other integrations, IPC adopted an "API-first" design philosophy and an open methodology, Carmody says, to "encourage more aggressive adoption of new technology." The API-first initiative meant that smaller teams in the company could independently sandbox tech projects and ideas, which could be implemented into the Unigy trading software without having to reinstall the entire product.

"With the open platform strategy, we are seeing a lot more interest in new technology adoption, whether it's real-time transcription or better analytics or tighter integration into the CRM systems," Carmody says.

Around 18 months ago, IPC created a sandbox within Connexus Labs—a place on the IPC network where developers could validate new technology. "Because it's connected to our Connexus network, you can get market data feeds, production, voice traffic, you can have it coexist with production, but then you can test out new technologies," Carmody says.

In practice, the company used Connexus Labs to create real-time transcripts with GreenKey Technologies, a New York-based vendor of natural language processing (NLP) services. The two companies last year [launched Blotter](#), a data visualization and front-end dashboard allowing traders to view and analyze voice trade information. Blotter leverages GreenKey's NLP engine to convert voice quotes into a structured data feed.

Carmody says that implementing technology developed in a sandbox is difficult for some customers as they struggle to decide where the technology actually needs to be in their own systems. Customers want new technology and tools and they want them now, but they prefer to have them embedded with Unigy.

"Creating Agility is an important step, but this isn't the final step. The digital transformation story is going to be one that we do see a lot more

and all these different technologies are going to start coming together,” Carmody says.

Opening up

Desktop app interoperability is becoming [a much-discussed topic](#) among financial firms.

Trading platforms have traditionally been closed-off systems. But with the rise of cloud, greater adoption of APIs, and the embrace of open-source tools, investment banks and asset managers are evolving legacy systems to make space for interoperability. In the last few years, major banks like [State Street](#), [Goldman Sachs](#), and [RBC](#) have all focused efforts on interop projects. As have exchanges like the [Intercontinental Exchange](#), and traditional trading platform providers like [Linedata](#) and [SS&C Advent](#).

At the same virtual conference mentioned earlier, Suvrat Bansal, head of innovation and CDO at UBS Asset Management, said that in the past, companies like Bloomberg aimed to tick every box with one system. “You can’t expect one company to solve all your needs in terms of internal workflows and data providers,” he said.

Carmody at IPC agrees with both Prado and Bansal, adding that “the requirement for greater flexibility for modern financial institutions underscores the need for open modular platforms and APIs, such as IPC Agility.”

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