

SYSB-II CASE STUDY

National distributor uses batch on demand to accelerate service, preserve major contracts



International Distributor



Overview

MRC Global is an international distributor that delivers key parts and supplies to the largest energy and processing industry companies in the world.

Business need

- MRC needed to process EDI orders from its largest customers faster than once per hour. Meeting a 30-minute turnaround commitment was paramount to retaining these major customers.

Solution

- MRC implemented SYSB-II, which allows VSAM batch jobs to run anytime while CICS remains available for write as well as read.

Benefits

- ✓ Processing batch on demand instead of once per hour allows MRC to meet its 30-minute order-fulfillment obligations.
- ✓ CICS remained available to online users during batch processing. This improved user satisfaction and reduced complaints.
- ✓ MRC implemented SYSB-II with no code changes and few process changes, while using current people skills.

Headquartered in Houston, Texas, Fortune 500 company MRC Global Inc. serves as a leading distributor of parts and supplies for some of the largest energy and processing industry companies. Pipe, valves, fittings, and more add up to \$3.41 billion in revenue for MRC, which was founded in 1921. The company employs more than 3,500 people at 400-plus locations globally.

Customers rely on MRC to keep their refineries, chemical plants, power generation stations, wells, pipelines, and drilling rigs running around the clock. This may require shipping orders within very narrow limits. “We do have some contracts that require a 30-minute turnaround for orders,” says Jeff Watson, electronic data interchange (EDI) and BtoB analyst for MRC.

“ Basically, some contracts require that the order is at the back door of the warehouse as soon as we receive the order.

- Jeff Watson

The impact of failing could be enormous. “If you haven’t met your obligation, then when the contract comes due, you may lose it,” says Watson. That’s why MRC turned to SYSB-II.

MRC struggles to keep order data current while keeping CICS data online

MRC's IT department provides services to its 100 branches as well as the corporate office. The IT environment contains an IBM mainframe running z/OS and Gentran EDI software. Timely order processing is a critical part of the department's job. Their largest customers submit orders using EDI.

"We had a high demand for just-in-time ordering from some of our customers," says Rod Lathey, mainframe systems programming manager. Orders that came in as EDI feeds were only being run as a batch job once an hour, which didn't allow employees to meet the goal of a 30-minute turnaround.

"Before we had SYSB-II, we were using a product to open and close files, doing CEMT from batch," says Lathey. "And that was a big hassle." Adds Watson: "On the customer side, it delayed us getting their orders. With our branch associates, it delayed their ability to deal with those orders and make sure they had material in stock to satisfy that order."

That's when MRC brought in SYSB-II, which is a system tool that allows batch jobs to run anytime without taking CICS data offline.



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If you graphed the use of SYSB-II in our shop, it would probably be an incline from day one until today. I think for that particular environment and that particular product, you've got the best product out there.

- Rod Lathey

SYSB-II results in current batch data available all day – on demand

Now, using SYSB-II, MRC processes incoming EDI orders on demand, about every four minutes, without taking CICS data down. “If it’s a customer order coming into our system, it gets processed as soon as it gets here,” says Lathey. Since implementing SYSB-II, the frequency of orders has increased. “That’s why we used SYSB-II to do the updating. Now some of the customers are sending us more files more often,” says Watson.

A secondary benefit to employing SYSB-II came to the online CICS users. With SYSB-II, the EDI batch jobs run just like any other CICS transaction. CICS data remains online to the users all day long. “After we stopped closing files every hour to do updates, we also stopped having complaints from customers and our online users who were trying to access those applications,” says Lathey.

MRC also maintained customer access and satisfaction by using SYSB-II’s syncpointing capability with mainframe applications like Focus. “Normally, we like to default our syncpointing at 100 transactions and commit,” says Lathey.

“If we enqueue CIs [control intervals] in particular tables for more than a second or two, we may seriously affect response times for all the end users within the corporation. The use of syncpointing in SYSB-II helps us to keep our enqueues in the sub-second range.’



SYSB-II effortlessly integrates with existing processes and current people skills

While MRC gained a great deal of benefit from SYSB-II, the product required only minor changes to procedures and minimal investment in staff training. SYSB-II runs without requiring programming changes to the mainframe applications with which it works. “The big advantage of SYSB-II was some of the applications we use for EDI are from another vendor, and we don’t have the source for those,” says Lathey. “All we had to do was to make JCL changes in order to interface with SYSB-II and CICS files. We eliminated the problem for the open and close so that we could perform our EDI transactions in a timely manner.”



Regarding training, “We trained a few key programmers and built some defaults, and it worked really well,” says Lathey. “There really wasn’t that much education. One chapter in the SYSB-II documentation was required reading, but that was really about the extent of the training.”

While data recovery is an important issue, it is seldom needed when using SYSB-II.

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We only use recovery when there’s anabend, and there’s very rarely anabend. Abends happen about once a year.

– Rod Lathey

Because SYSB-II has been an established part of MRC’s IT infrastructure for more than 20 years, its IT staff members are familiar with H&W’s support. “I think H&W has excellent support,” says Lathey.

“ I’ve been around for a long time. I’ve been a systems programmer for 33 years, and there used to be a lot of good companies out there. Now there aren’t that many good companies left, but you are one of them.

- Rod Lathey

I mean how many companies do you call and actually talk to a developer? And it doesn’t look that way as far as I’m concerned with anybody else at this point..”

Future: Achieving 24/7 access would be easily attainable

While things are going well for MRC, the IT department is looking to possible changes in the future. MRC still closes down CICS at night for various reasons unrelated to SYSB-II, but the IT staff are considering making information available on demand, around the clock. “We do intend in the future to go toward a 24/7 availability for CICS,” says Lathey. “We really only have one or maybe two branches that demand our CICS to be available 24/7 but as that demand increases, we’ll probably gear more toward it.” If that demand changed tomorrow, would anything keep them from achieving it? “Probably not,” says Lathey. “Just a little planning, and seriously, probably heavier usage of SYSB-II and we could do that.”



MRC achieves goals, use of SYSB-II continues to grow

With the implementation of SYSB-II, MRC was able to improve its already strong commitment to customer service by improving order turnaround time. In doing so, the IT staff also improved service to online CICS users. They no longer had to close files for CICS every hour to process orders. Using syncpointing enabled them to optimize online CICS application service levels so end users experienced good response times.

Thanks to SYSB-II, they accomplished all of this without having to make programmatic changes to mainframe applications whose code they do not have. They didn't have to change operational procedures or burden their staff with time-consuming training. They are also able to get top-notch service and support when they need it.

"If you graphed the use of SYSB-II in our shop, it would probably be an incline from day one until today," says Lathey. "It just seems like we use it more and more every day. I think for that particular environment and that particular product, you've got the best product out there."

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