# Hands on: Unipart

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The Unipart Group of Companies operates one of Europe's largest logistics networks, distributing goods for clients such as Jaguar and Land Rover in the automotive sector and Vodafone and Hewlett-Packard in the technology sector. In addition, Unipart provides distribution services to ecommerce companies through its Ufulfil.com business unit, announced by the company in April 2000. "Unipart is now in the efulfillment business, and we have had to rethink our IT systems as a result," says Jonathan Wynne-Carter, ebusiness technical architect in Unipart's Demand Chain Management (DCM) business unit.

With this in mind, Unipart began implementing version 4.5 of the R/3 business application suite from German software giant SAP in early 1999. But while the R/3 implementation is seen as an important foundation for Unipart's IT systems, it does not fully support Unipart's need to create an application integration architecture which can tie together both the company's existing businesses, and also its new Internet and ecommerce-driven initiatives.

"We have historically integrated closely with our clients and wanted to take that collaboration further," says Wynne-Carter. In addition, he adds, Unipart runs a number of disparate legacy and bespoke systems for inventory management and forecasting, for example, which need to tie in to the new R/3 system.

So while the implementation of R/3 represents a "fresh start" for the company, he says, it was important that it could be integrated with a large number of external and internal systems, and that the integration could be closely managed and controlled. As a result, says Wynne-Carter, "we were very keen that R/3 did not itself become the integration hub of our business."

Instead, the company decided to establish an independent integration hub based on an enterprise application integration suite. It assessed technology from a list of five EAI vendors looking for a product, which could address its full integration needs. "We had hoped one tool would cover all these areas, but we did some digging, and quickly found that that wasn't going to happen." The closest fit, says Wynne-Carter, was integration software from Mercator. Unipart has implemented Mercator's data transformation technology, the vendor's specific adapters for R/3 and some content-based routing capabilities. It is also employing IBM's MQSeries messaging software as its transportation layer. At a later stage, Unipart may investigate business process-based integration, but Wynne-Carter adds: "For now, there is enough to do just putting everything in place to manage integration at the message and application levels."

~ **Infoconomy (21st Feb 2004)**