

University Graduates Being Trained to Become Mainframe Developers

The Consist Cobol Training Initiative

By Dr. Ingo Büll von der Burchard

Why are many companies still relying on Cobol programs in core areas of their IT? Has management not responded as newer approaches such as object orientation or service-oriented architectures promised the coming of a modern age?

You can simply rely on old systems

The reasons for the continued survival of Cobol, and even mainframe structures themselves, are complex and cannot be narrowed down to a single concrete cause. Companies that use a mainframe are normally of medium size and up, and have extensive IT systems.

Typical industries for the mainframe are banks, insurance companies, trading businesses, and the government. These develop and maintain the greater part of their applications within their own IT departments, sometimes IT departments of some size, which over time leads to extensive organically developed structure. There is therefore automatically a certain resistance to the race for the latest

inventions of IT strategists. Core systems cannot always be adapted to the current fashion in IT. A certain degree of consistency is simply necessary to ensure that the enterprise continues to have access to reliable, high-performance IT.

Personnel structures in transition

Additional significant influences on IT strategy in the enterprise result from personnel structures. With a certain set of personnel, only a certain range of IT can be implemented. This influence is significantly reduced

by the use of external consultants, but it cannot be eliminated.

Finally, though, it is exactly here that an increasingly obvious

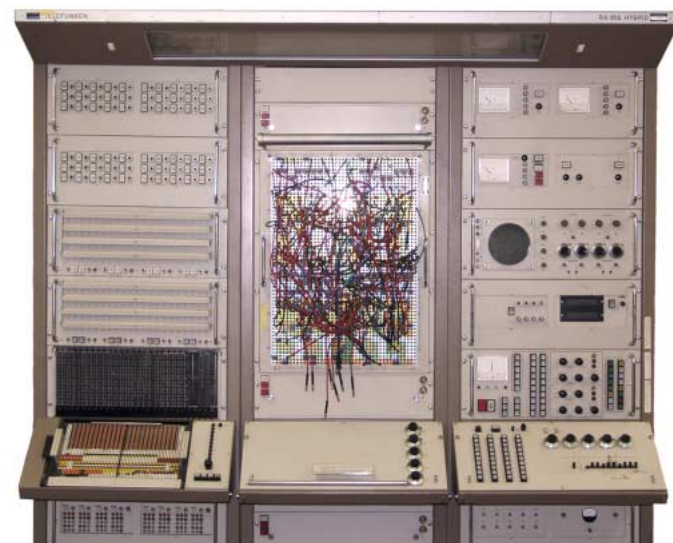


photo: Consist

This nice piece is ready for the museum – but not Cobol!

CONNECT STRATEGY

problem arises for companies using mainframe and/or legacy systems. The employees in question are nearing retirement, and leaving positions that are increasingly difficult to fill. The gap between the supply and demand of mainframe developers is growing. To stay attractive, universities naturally tend to concentrate on up-to-date topics like Java and modern architectures, so the turnover problem in the mainframe arena is hardly addressed.

On the other hand, there are now so many Java consultants that the market for object-oriented technology is increasingly saturated. University graduates and entry-level career hopefuls will therefore have more difficulties in the Java arena than they did a few years ago.

What could be more obvious than to open up a new, long-term career path in the mainframe area for those affected?

Cobol training initiative

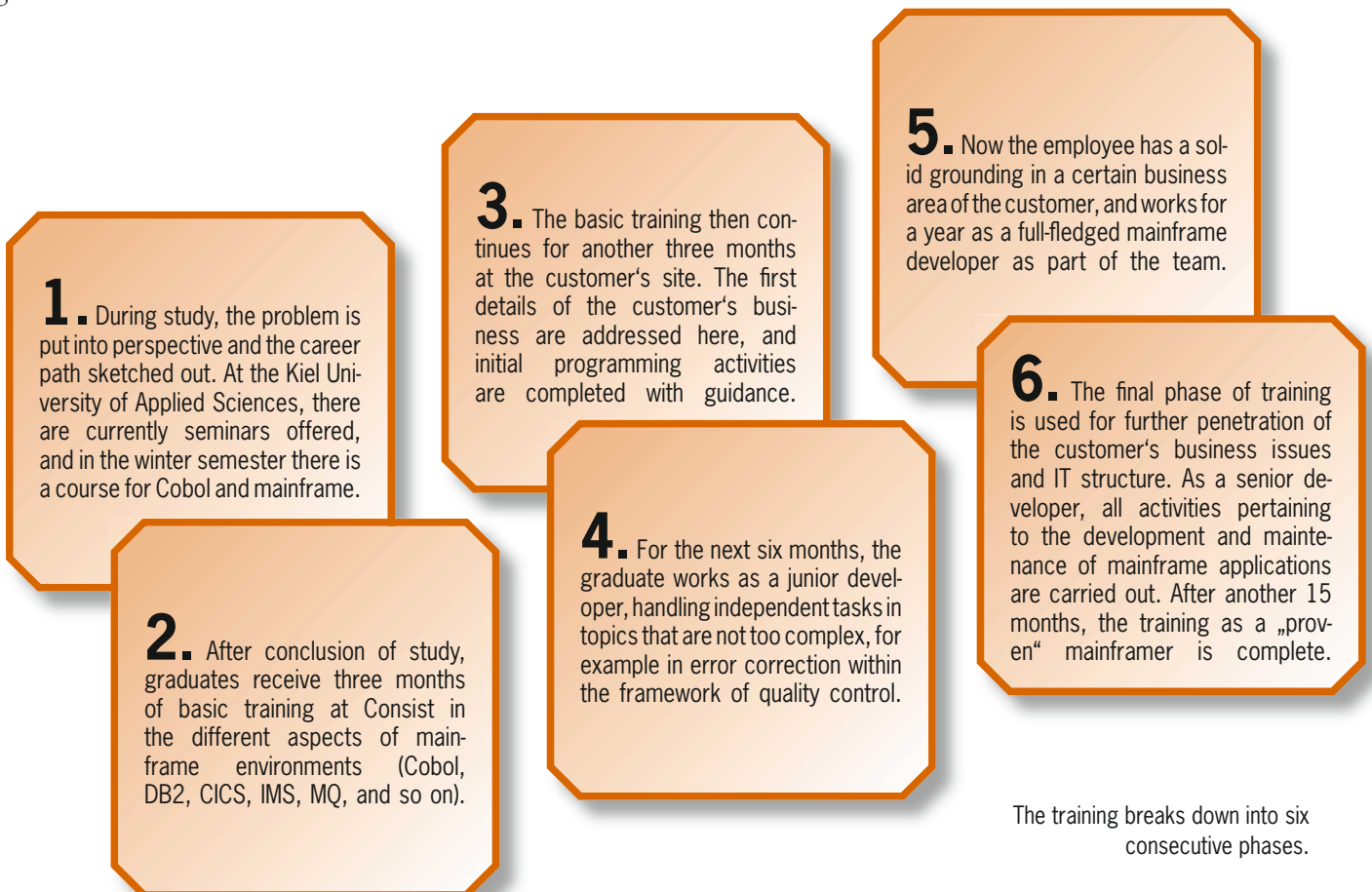
Consist Software Solutions, together with customers and universities, has put some thought into the topic of ensuring long-term availability of development services for mainframe applications, and developed a new career path for entry-level people. In the context of the Cobol training initiative, young university graduates, such as those with a Bachelor's degree in Internet Science and Technology, are trained as senior developers for the mainframe in a project lasting 3 to 4 years.

Future prospects

We are currently seeing a great deal of interest in the Cobol training initiative on the part of our customers. Since the market situation will continue to improve due to age structures, we are very optimistic for the future of this topic. Particularly the cooperation between universities, customers, and Consist permits a goal-oriented process that guarantees success.

In the end, participants will achieve two significant goals:

- A solid education for entry-level people in an interesting technological field, and
- Ensuring the development and maintenance of mainframe applications by young employees.



The training breaks down into six consecutive phases.

Starting a Project with Cobol



Arne Gattermann and Göran Kordes are the first participants in the Consist Cobol training initiative.

Since November 2009, I've been working on a project for ivv – Informationsverarbeitung für Versicherungen GmbH – in downtown Hanover. The company is an IT service provider for insurance companies in Northern and Eastern Germany. Its largest client is the insurance group VGH Hanover, in whose offices ivv is also headquartered. Before that, I was trained in working with Cobol for three months at Consist with my colleague Göran Kordes.

In addition to system operation and the user service, one focus of the enterprise is on application development, in which a central insurance application is maintained and further developed. In teams of five to fifteen people, business components like vehicle, prop-

erty, or life insurance are continually improved. We are employed in the "Life" team, which includes not only life insurance, but also disability insurance and pensions.

I was pleasantly surprised by the unexpectedly modern application development and architecture, which I did not associate with the supposedly antiquated Cobol programming language. The insurance application has an up-to-date three-layer architecture, with a Java front end, logic, and data storage on Solaris servers or the host. The tools and procedures are adapted to today's requirements, which you can see by the PC-based development tools and a powerful version control system.

In addition to development on the PC, tasks on the host are regularly required. I managed a smooth familiarization with those tasks due to the business and programming knowledge Consist gave me as part of my Cobol training.

The training phase at Consist was followed by a thorough phase of learning at the insurance company, where I joined a project for optimizing the application and could learn the many complexities of the business. Regular training meetings with the team were a great help.

After three months, I had enough experience to complete several tasks on my own in the context of the project, and I'm now part of the planning for the next release.

The friendly spirit of cooperation within the team and with other departments, as well as the complexity of the business, mean that my work is always interesting and fun.

My summary: Cobol is a classical, mature programming language with a solid place in today's projects.

Arne Gattermann

Long-term, interesting career path as a
mainframe developer

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