



## An interview with some of the key players behind the new FIX website



*By Sam Johnson, CEO, TransactTools Inc.*

**In September 2004, FPL officially announced the much-anticipated launch of its new website. The goals for the new site were ambitious, and the result is impressive in its functionality and complexity. In this article, Sam Johnson interviews three individuals who played key roles throughout the new site's design, development and rollout.**



**Jim Northey,**

*Jordan and Jordan*

Manager, Derivatives Practice Area and Chair, FPL Global Derivatives Committee

Jim has been involved with enhancing the FIX specification to support derivatives trading,

primarily listed derivatives, since 1999 with FIX 4.2. Much of his work with FPL has revolved around FIXML, market data optimization, and interoperability with FpML.



**Scott Atwell,**

*American Century Investments*

Manager of F.I.X. Trading and Connectivity and FPL Co-chair Global Steering Committee and FPL Co-chair Global Technical Committee

Scott has co-led the Global

Technical Committee for the past 7 years overseeing the spec releases since FIX 4.1, has served as a member of FPL's Global Steering Committee since its inception, and was recently elected to serve as Co-chair of FPL's Global Steering Committee.



**John Harris,**

*BondMart Technologies, Inc. CEO*

John has participated in the FIX for Fixed Income effort for four years, first as part of the Fixed Income Working Group and then the Global Fixed Income Committee.

He is also a member of the Global Education and Marketing Committee.

First off, thanks for taking the time to do this - I know you are all very busy. The new website looks great! Obviously a lot of effort went into its creation. What were the major goals for the new site?

**Atwell:** Thank you for the feedback. We launched Phase I on September 4, 2004. The new, re-designed site includes a new, crisp, clean look, restructured and enhanced menus and screen displays, and contains a completely overhauled, modernized website infrastructure. The end result represents a much more functional FIX website with improved

performance and increased flexibility. The new infrastructure will permit us to integrate new functionality more quickly.

**Harris:** We also wanted to provide a better user experience for the developers and volunteers who use the site. We approached the project with a lot of ideas about how to make the real work associated with maintaining and extending the protocol-whether writing code or organizing new work groups-significantly easier. This phase was chiefly concerned with implementing the infrastructure required for future usability enhancements and productivity features.

**Northey:** I think the most important benefit in re-engineering the website is providing a platform where we can readily grow the site as requirements change and as the organization grows. The technology recommended by Angel Networks is extremely robust and functional.

When did the project begin and how was it managed from an FPL standpoint?

**Atwell:** We established the budget and commercial terms for the endeavor towards the end of 2003. Identifying the project's technical requirements and features began shortly thereafter. Development began around the beginning of 2004. We knew that gathering and managing FPL's requirements was going to be a big job and that it needed focused attention. We also wanted to insulate the website developers from project management. Thus, FPL contracted with Jim Northey of LaSalle Technology Management (he moved to Jordan and Jordan in February) to handle requirements gathering and project management. The website project's executive sponsors included Peter Randall, our Executive Director, and Michael O'Connor, the GSC Chairman. The project itself represented a joint initiative between FPL's Global Education and Marketing Committee and Global Technical Committee. From an FPL perspective, the core team included John Harris representing the GEMC, Scott Atwell representing the GTC, and Jim Northey who handled project management responsibilities. Numerous other individuals were also involved in making the project a success.

How was the decision made to select Angel Networks for this project? Now that the site is live, does Angel continue to play a role in its management or operation?

**Atwell:** Angel Networks ([www.angel.net](http://www.angel.net)) has been hosting the FIX website and maintaining the previous site which they "inherited" for approximately 3 years. We selected

Angel to take over both responsibilities after losing the previous site's developer who joined another firm and after recognizing the need to move hosting providers as PSINet was going out of business. We were also able to reduce FPL's cost for both services. Yes, Angel continues to handle the site's hosting and development requirements.

**Northey:** I would just add that although Angel plays a crucial ongoing role in the site's management, it is voluntary contributions that drive a lot of the innovation for something like this. Since June my personal involvement in the website project has been on a volunteer basis, and others have helped as well. I feel volunteer contributions are still a crucial element in the success of the FIX protocol.

When we were designing the predecessor website almost 6 years ago, FIX was a largely "virtual" organization and the website had to play a critical role as the central repository of everything for a distributed, voluntary community. As FPL has grown in size and complexity, what effect has that had on the role of the website? What can you tell us about the user community today-size, demographics, etc.?

**Atwell:** I remember those days well... I believe we had approximately 1,000 users at that time. Today we have over 36,000 user id's registered on the FIX website. This number is a bit skewed as we have a lot of "old email addresses", although one feature we put in with the new website was better tracking of when users last used the site and monitoring email system "bounces". Regardless, we have seen exponential growth in terms of the number of users who register and use the site. I think FPL has grown to be a much larger "virtual" organization and the website has had to support this. At the time of the cutover we had over 800 distinct individuals listed on our various committees and working groups. I believe we had over 60 individuals who had some level of admin authority over these groups as well. We have 250 vendors listed on the vendors page. Our largest discussion forums have nearly 7,000 subscribers. FPL has over 120 member firms-about five times as many as we had when we launched the predecessor site. We added a special section on the new website to list the FPL members and provide details for each. The geographic diversity of FPL members, committee, and working group activities has increased and the website continues to play a key role.

Can you highlight a few specific new features / improvements in the new site?

**Atwell:** The new site has the ability to associate individual user id's with FPL member firms and provide those individuals with FPL Member privileges. You can "tell" that you have these privileges by the "/ FPL Member" which will appear after your name in the upper-right corner of the screen. The new site's foundation is fully database-based while the previous site did not use a database in its original incarnation. Another nice feature with the new site is the ability for each committee and working group to have its own @fixprotocol.org email address. What is kind of cool about that is the fact that we can control who can send mail to those group email aliases to avoid spamming. The new website also provides a greater level of access control over documents which are posted and shared within FPL's various groups and sections of the site.

**Northey:** We also have a significantly enhanced discussion forum that includes the ability to do searches. The website infrastructure will permit us to keep our current content available, while being able to offer premium content for FPL members. An example of this is that members can in essence have their own FPL member page.

**Harris:** The publishing infrastructure and database integration are superb. We can almost structure, format, and publish results of new queries on the fly. For example, Scott thought it would be neat if we could add a tabbed interface to the committee pages, with new tabs for members and documents showing counts associated with each. Nic at Angel had that working on the dev server in minutes. We now can get new groups started, with membership, document stores, descriptive information, and an email alias in a matter of minutes, and have the group admin be immediately productive in terms of maintaining his corner of the site.

**Northey:** I also want to emphasize that the previous website developed by Mike Muir was way ahead of its time and offered a large amount of functionality. The FPL organization was very well served by the previous website for almost 6 years. We hope that the new one will provide the same exception high quality service as the previous site did.

Mike is now working for TransactTools, so I'll pass along those kind words.

In parallel with the development of the new site, at least one other central utility for users and members was being

developed by FPL-the FIX specification repository database. Were these initiatives coordinated from an architecture standpoint, or were they just independent initiatives happening concurrently?

**Atwell:** These were independent initiatives although we timed releasing them at the same time. The FIX Repository ([www.fixprotocol.org/repository](http://www.fixprotocol.org/repository)) is a database representation of the FIX Protocol specification's messages, fields, valid values, tag=value and FIXML syntax representations, etc. It was originally built by Kevin Houston, as a part of the FIX 4.4 release process, as a tool for the Global Technical Committee. The FIX Repository was used to generate Volume 6 of the FIX 4.4 spec, the FIXML DTD and Schema files, and the FIXimate online cross-reference tool. FPL has made the FIX Repository available to FPL members using the new website's capability to control access to resources to FPL members.

What has the reaction to the new site been like from users?

**Atwell:** All of the feedback we have received has been very positive. In fact, even the few individuals who have had to contact us to resolve problems have prefaced their complaint with complements on the new site.

**Northey:** Agreed, I was a bit concerned at first, after all the "new" interface was "old" to me at roll out-I had gotten used to the features. It was only after we went live and we started receiving positive feedback and I started using the site that the functionality and usability of the site really hit home.

**Harris:** Perhaps the best result from my perspective is that so many people have been motivated to come forward with new ideas for the site. They have been stimulated to think about the site as a tool that can help them with their work, which is great.

What's next, if anything?

**Atwell:** We actually have a pretty large list of enhancements. We plan to release updates every few weeks in "iterations". Some of these enhancements are improvements to what has already been delivered-for instance, we plan to improve the committee and working group pages by separating the content containing the group's description, list of members, and documents into three "tabs". We also have plans to offer new, fee-based services as part of an overall effort to derive FPL funding from non-membership sources. I think you will see a fee-based Help Wanted service, advertising and other sponsorship services, and an online store in the future.

**Northey:** Some of the other things we are planning is a database FAQ that can be searched, some form of basic scheduling, improvements to FIXimate (look and feel along with integration of the FIXML schema syntax).

I would just encourage member firms to get involved in creating their own "space" on the website and to start taking advantage of some of the services provided by FPL that can enhance communication within a member organization and between member organizations.

*Sam Johnson is CEO at TransactTools, and played a small role in working with Mike Muir to develop the old FIX website way back when.*

#### Any thoughts on this or other articles?

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