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I began working with the Camile laboratory control system in 1989, shortly after Dow Chemical began marketing it outside of the company. At the time, the hardware was all manufactured in-house and the software ran on Microsoft DOS. Since that time, I have been with Camile through 6 ownership changes, 15 versions of Microsoft Windows, and the transition from homegrown hardware to partnering with Opto22 and their SNAP-Ethernet hardware. Since 2009, I have been fortunate to own the Camile business myself as part of CRW Automation Solutions. The best part of the past 34 years has been working with all the amazing scientists and technicians to help them use this technology platform to advance their research. The challenge of understanding the needs of so many varied processes and how best to automate them has been fascinating. Like so many times before, however, it is time for another transition. After much consideration, I have made the difficult decision to begin the process of winding down our business operations. I will try to explain some of the reasons for this decision and what the timeline will look like below.

Software

The last major version of the CamileTG software was written over the period of 2001-2005, and resulted in the very stable version 5.0. Versions 5.1 and 5.2 were minor revisions that added support for new Opto 22 hardware and extensions to the macro language. These macro extensions have allowed us to add functionality such as full-featured recipe editors, consistent serial device drivers, OPC, and Modbus interfaces without needing to modify the base CamileTG software. Since the last recompile of the base software in 2010, many of the third-party libraries used in its development have become obsolete. As a result, any software changes requiring a recompilation would also require a major re-write using new third-party libraries, an expense not warranted by market demands. We have been able to support subsequent Windows versions 10 and 11 through changes to installation scripts and configuration procedures, but this has become increasingly more difficult over the past few years. At some point, Microsoft will release a Windows update that we simply can't address with patches. Since corporate operating system upgrades tend to be rather conservative, that point is most likely a few years away for most users, since we are currently running internal test systems on the latest Windows 11 release.

Hardware

Opto22 has remained committed to their SNAP Ethernet line of hardware, because they have many customers other than Camile that use it. Nevertheless, they do continue to update the hardware and sometimes parts become obsolete. That was the case with the SNAP-PAC-EB2 brain that is used with the Camile system last year. We were able to participate in the last manufacturing run of the PAC-EB2 brain, and

have approximately 40 of them in stock. After that stock is depleted, it will not be possible to build new systems without a major re-write of the CamileTG software. As discussed above, this is not a viable scenario for us. For users with multiple systems, I would encourage the purchase of at least some PAC-EB2 brains to establish a backup supply in case an existing system fails before it is possible to transition to a different platform.

Another hardware issue that continues to be a challenge is extremely long lead times on some parts from our supplier. Over the past two years, Opto22 has experienced significant delays on components used in certain IO modules. The delays have been particularly long for analog input modules, resulting in lead times of 8-10 weeks and in some cases several months. Our customers use quite a wide variety of different modules in their projects, so it is not feasible for us to maintain a long-term stockpile of all possible modules. These lead times make it impossible to maintain the level of responsiveness we are accustomed to.

Timeline

At this time, the plan is to stop accepting orders for new Camile systems at the end of 2023. I will continue to support existing users through the end of 2024, and will work only on a case-by-case contract basis after that. If you have existing Camile systems that use the Opto22 SNAP Ethernet hardware (also known as CamileConnections) you will be able to gradually change over to different software without replacing the hardware portion of your system. If you are still using the chassis-based Camile hardware (2000, 2200, 2500, 3000, 3300, or 4000), you will need to upgrade the hardware as well. You can switch to the SNAP Ethernet hardware now and continue to run the CamileTG software without changing your applications. This approach would give you some additional time to migrate to a long-term solution.

If you have purchased any of our "Universal" serial device drivers over the past several years, you are aware that these are software-based licenses tied to a specific computer. Before we close down the business, any existing device drivers will be converted to a license-free version that can also be used with any other software that is able to call Windows COM objects. We have demonstrated this ability with Visual Basic .NET and National Instruments LabView software.

Over the coming year, I would welcome inquiries about creating a site license for the Camile software that would allow you to use it after the close of our business.

Sincerely,

Craig Wierenga
Owner