ENTERPRISE APPLICATION INTEGRATION

Integration has always been a much-used word in systems circles. Its unfortunate that it has often remained that - a much-used word, rather than a real, practical approach to system design. Of course the ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) offerings have shown us the way, but these are often so large, unwieldy and inflexible that 'integration' stifles rather than releases the effective flow of information.

Now it seems that a new generation of enterprise application integration (EAI) tools is moving us nearer to a true 'plug-and-play' systems approach - offering the speed and flexibility especially necessary for success in the e-world.

Of course, as ever with IT, the promise is, as yet, stronger than the reality. They are only moving towards being 'plug and play'; as yet, you'll find yourself writing significant amounts of code to link the linkages. It is possible to adopt a single tool to link a range of disparate systems but there will be some interface work needed for most of the links. The very flexibility of the tools - and their ability to handle a vast range of data and message types - means that there is a lot to learn and discovering all the abilities and nuances of any one of the tools requires a lot of training and practice. So, although they are not complex conceptually, in practical terms there is a lot of complex detail to unravel.

The kind of application that makes this complexity worthwhile is, for example, lining systems to automate the flow of documentation accompanying shipments from a distribution depot. By linking all systems to a central hub, an organisation can let staff access data on any customer anywhere in the world. A 'traditional' approach would be to replicate a master system in each distribution location, but some of these may be too small to justify such an approach. Besides, each location might need a local component to handle local customs and tax regulations.

EAI allows the organisation to leave legacy systems in place but to overlay them with an EAI approach that can take data out of the systems, process it and send it to the right destination system.

Derry Newman, IT manager of Sony Broadcast and Professional Europe, believes a single EAI tool can meet all a company's needs. He says Sony is using just the Crossworlds tool because EAI tools demand implementation staff with skill in both the tool and the target systems and are therefore expensive and scarce. Multiple integration approaches make hiring these skills more of a headache (and an expense) and increase a company's dependence on the one or two people who know how to use each tool. Sony makes and distributes audio-visual products to TV production companies and corporate users. It has just finished implementing integrated in-house SAP systems and now wants to link them to its channel partners and customers. The aim with channel partners is to take cost and timeout of the supply chain, while Newman sees linking to corporate customers as a strategic advantage. "The easier we are to do business with, the more 'sticky' a supplier we become," he explains.

Sony chose Crossworlds because it has connectors - pre-built integration modules - for SAP and for other applications. "We didn't and still don't entirely know what we may have to connect to, so we need something that is flexible," says Newman. "The IT team also felt Crossworlds would require relatively few in-house resources to get up and running with each partner. That's been borne out with our first implementation, with General Electric in France, where it took just five weeks to get from our first meeting to passing messages successfully."

Newman admits there are drawbacks to using a single tool. "You don't necessarily have the optimum solution," he points out. "We've already had to buy an upgrade to get more connectors as we encountered an
unexpected system in a trading partner. Having said that, we've yet to run into an integration need where we haven't felt in a position to start discussing and planning. I can go to meetings with corporate customers and channel partners and not worry about what flavour of IT they've got." Of course, with EAI you need to understand the problem before you select the tool to use. There is no one magic solution - but selecting one primary EAI tool will help provide consistency across multiple integration projects.

CHOOSING AN EAI TOOL

Just ask these simple questions:

* What applications, interfaces, message formats and technologies are currently supported and what further enhancements are planned?
* How easy will it be to adapt integration projects to changes in business or technology?
* What developer skills and resources will be required? How do these relate to what you already have?
* Does the tool have a visual or rules-based interface which will allow it to be used by end-users?
* What support and service does the supplier itself offer and what partnering arrangements and training programmes does it have in place with systems integrators?

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