SOA Link – A Seedbed for SOA Growth

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With the development of standards, there are many approaches to buying and building software to support business process. SOAP and XML offer a way to glue different application elements together via Web Services. This is much the same way that remote procedure calls (RPCs) did in the past, but with more reusability. While simple connectivity does not give you the full functionality that will let you balance workloads - and throttle back less critical applications - for the benefit of the enterprise, it is the basis of building out more complex infrastructures.

Service-oriented architectures promise the ability to tailor software for a better fit, together with the policies and system-based control systems to make the whole effective and easily managed. The SOA stack players, such as IBM, BEA, and SAP, address many of the challenges inherent to SOA challenges with completeness. If services are developed within the platform of, say *WebSphere*, they will work with other services using the same stack. Exceptions are possible, in this era of open standards, but will not be as easy as staying within the stack domain. Pure plays offer more specificity of focus, and, with proper federation, can be aggregated into a new for of the best of breed approach. The federation of smaller players (mostly start-ups) can be a more unfettered environment for innovation. Like a perennial bed that is most interesting if not weeded too soon in the springtime, federation allows a wide array of new modules to develop. Some will be what is most kindly called *instructive mistakes*, but some will be of considerable value. The trade-offs between the stack and federated approaches, and the extent to which they can be combined into hybrid solutions, will become clear as more standards are ratified. However, this will take time.

The quality of the links that aggregate Service Oriented Architectures can be the difference between success and failure. Even if you favor the stack approach, new links will be needed to extend across heterogeneous platforms and organizational borders. There will always be custom modules from beyond the domains of the stack, and a need for an expeditious way to ascertain that they are more than wishful thinking. Of course, there is more to SOAs than the link. Orchestration and security are also part of basic functionality – *but if the links don't provide full functionality, nothing else matters*. Furthermore, what is needed to make these links fully functional will depend on the functions being linked in and what languages and protocols are used.

The policy standards (WS-Policy) that have been sent to the W3C committee are the latest batch of the standards that will make service oriented architectures easier to deploy safely. They are not yet final and may evolve, as early deployments reveal new vulnerabilities. It's a bit of a chicken and egg problem, in that early experience will reveal the governance structures needed, but early experience must have the controls to be successful that will allow that knowledge to be gleaned.

Sixteen of the SOA pure-play companies have announced an *SOA Link* assurance program to fill the need for assured service links. SOA Link is a participative approach, which just might be a new paradigm for a lower-cost route to interoperability.

SOA Link Details

There are three levels of participation.

1. *A statement of interoperability* that states that two application modules will work together (and why you would want them to) but gives no verification. This can act as a call to surface a community that is interested in working on that particular problem.

2. *Publication of the link.* An ISV will file to publish a link, asserting specific kinds of interoperability between specific products. This gives the community something to test.

3. *Validation of the link.* Here, the validation is not by the vendors of the relevant products, or the people who developed the link, but by a customer who has used the link successfully. Unlike case studies, this does not require that the customer reveal any business details, or even the nature of the project in which the linkage was involved.

Given the permutations of service linkages, this open participation model may be just what is needed – not just in anticipation of the standards that will come out of W3C and other standards bodies, but for the long haul. The open posting of the statements, specifications, and validations will be instructive to anybody thinking about deploying the service links. It gives all SOA users a way to observe and participate in the build-out of service architectures. This convenient community will help to keep the SOA world from forking into contentious camps, something that happens in technology far too often. Yet it does not require affiliation or loyalty. One might imagine that new kinds of linkages would require new kinds of standards. Thus, this kind of community is the feedback loop that turns the limitations of a closed loop into an ongoing spiral.

We have all experienced the barriers to progress that incumbency can create. *SOA Link*, and communities like it, may promote the focused commonalities that will give control while fostering rapid evolution. The SOA linkage is the right place to put such a mechanism in place. Think about how you can benefit from, and participate in, this community.

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