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The Agile Desktop

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Three of the hottest IT trends over the past couple of years have been SOA, BPM and virtualization. Each shows tremendous promise for delivering real measurable impact to an enterprise's bottom line. But each also comes with a set of challenges for the ultimate consumers of these technologies, business users. Just as telecommunications and cable companies were forced to address the "last mile" of connectivity into users' homes; so too must we address the "last mile" for SOA, BPM and virtualization. How these technologies impact, positively or negatively, user's desktops and their ability to perform their jobs will ultimately determine the success of these technologies. The purpose of this article is to introduce some of these challenges that you may not have yet considered, suggest a possible solution and outline the interaction between desktops and these technologies actually creates new opportunities to create the agile desktop.

Desktop Challenges of SOA, Virtualization and BPM

The IT industry has long been focused more on how applications and services should be created rather than how they will be consumed. We take a uni-directional approach. Once we build some new bits of functionality, we push it out to the business users and expect them adopt, consume and eventually benefit from it. We have IT support staffs to answer any questions. But the reality is that this approach has led to a mess on our users' desktops. There is plenty of blame to go around: new IT regimes, acquisitions and mergers, changing business requests and more. But the result is similar across virtually any organization, desktops cluttered with dozens of applications most of which do not talk to each other. Copy-and-paste is still the primary integration method.

SOA as an architectural strategy offers tremendous benefit for the business; eventually, when organizations can service-enable enough of their IT assets to actually replace the applications currently scattered across desktops. Until then? Business users not only have to learn that new Web or rich Internet application but they have to continue to use all of the other applications as well. That new SOA-based Web application actually just becomes yet one more silo that doesn't talk to their client-server CRM application or their host billing system.

Virtualization further complicates the desktop environment. Unless all applications are hosted in the same virtualized environment, which defeats the whole purpose of virtualization, virtualized applications become even harder to integrate with the other applications on the desktop. In fact, virtualization vendors are just now enabling copy-and-pasting of data from a virtualized application to a desktop application. And with all of the promise of BPM, it is still essentially limited to server-side or service-enabled applications. Processes can alert a human to a process that must be completed but can do little to help if that process requires interaction with applications that reside on the desktop. A disconnect still exists between BPM processes and user's desktops.

Introducing the Agile Desktop

The Agile Desktop is aimed at reducing the complexity for business users. It provides an environment where new SOA services can be delivered to user's desktops as they are developed in whatever way makes most sense; whether that be via a new enterprise mashup or through an existing application's user interface. The agile desktop extends all of the old legacy stuff that IT organizations don't want to touch and allows them to become a part of a company's SOA implementation.

The agile desktop enables virtualized applications to share data easily with other virtualized and non-virtualized applications alike.

The agile desktop provides the bridge between people and systems to drive business process management effectiveness. The agile desktop essentially becomes the intersection point of business users, all of their existing applications and business logic, and all of the new technology. The agile desktop is a desktop environment that allows all of these technologies to integrate seamlessly, improving user productivity instead of impacting it. It is the last mile of SOA, virtualization and BPM.

Enabling the Agile Desktop

Painting the picture of the future is the easy part. Making it happen is the obviously hard part. Hundreds of companies have been creating integration solutions over the past few decades and yet integration between disparate applications remains a major challenge for most enterprises. Popular thinking has shifted from screen scraping at the UI level to server-side application API's and an increasing focus on industry standards to simplify the exchange of data between applications and increasingly SOA services. But the challenge of integration is getting harder, not easier.

Enabling the agile desktop means taking a unique approach to integration. The one common denominator that spans all participants in business transactions, desktop applications, server-side applications, third party or SAAS applications, Web services, "closed" legacy applications, and even the business user themselves, is that each interacts with the underlying operating system in some way shape or form. Every mouse click. Every data entry. Every piece of application logic. Each creates events that are processed by the underlying operating system. Thus, the operating system provides a mechanism for truly integrating people and systems.

When you have the ability to intercept the messages between applications and user actions via a mouse or keyboard and the underlying operating system, you then have the power to integrate virtually anything, to automate virtually anything, even to change the behavior of applications or users by adding new logic. It means you can extend a 25 year old DOS application by adding new Web services functionality. It means you can prevent a particular employee group from accessing privileged information in a particular application or prevent another group from processing a particular type of transaction. It means you can track where a business user is within a business process or identify why a particular transaction failed. It means you can enable a streamed or virtualized application to share data with a "closed" desktop application. You are only constrained by your own imagination.

Enterprises around the world are starting to implement desktop integration solutions to enable the agile desktop. For example, a leading customer service organization recently built a series of desktop integration and automation solutions that condensed the number of screens its agents were forced to use to process customer orders; saving several minutes per transaction,

which translates to several million dollars per year. A leading international investment bank recently implemented an agile desktop solution for their middle office trade processing; streamlining cumbersome processes while simultaneously improving data accuracy and ensuring compliance with key industry and government regulations.

Getting from Here to There

By combining the power of Web services with a desktop operating system-approach to integration, you create a simple path to enabling the agile desktop. Replacing existing integration solutions that work today makes no sense for an enterprise. But what about all of the applications that are not easily integrated today? Every organization has dozens of applications that they just can't integrate for one reason or another. What if you could leverage the agile desktop approach to rapidly create new integrations and business process automations and then expose them as Web services that can be consumed within an existing SOA framework or integration suite? What if you could track user activity or events and expose that data via a Web service? When you combine the power of operating system or "desktop integration" with your existing infrastructure, you make the agile desktop a reality.

With more than 20 years of experience in running multinational technology companies, Francis Carden has a track record of delivering successful technology solutions to thousands of clients in more than 30 countries. As founder and CEO of Pixel Innovations Ltd, Francis specialized in software integration services, partnering with organizations like IBM, Sun and Microsoft to offer his customers industry-leading solutions. Since the sale of his company to a large healthcare software integration company in 2001, Francis has been an active investor in technology companies in the US. In 2005, Francis was lured back to the front lines by the opportunity to head up the all-star executive team at OpenSpan.

Joe McGonnell leads worldwide marketing activities for OpenSpan. Prior to joining OpenSpan, Joe spent three years leading marketing for JBoss, a highly successful open source software company eventually acquired by Red Hat in June 2006. Joe was the first marketing hire at JBoss and helped to build a highly successful model and marketing organization that drove awareness for JBoss products and services and helped to position JBoss as a leader in the open source software movement. Prior to joining JBoss, Joe spent more than ten years in various product management and product marketing roles for Hewlett Packard, Bluestone Software and Checkpoint Systems.

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