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Out with the old IT model and in with the new



The arrival of SOA calls for a fundamental shift in methodology - when it comes to implementing new IT, 'rip and replace' is a thing of the past. Businesses need to focus on giving end-users what they want from the systems already in place. It's far more cost-effective and it eliminates lengthy implementation times.

Across the industry there's a general misconception that 'legacy system' equals old or bad so they must need replacing with new technology. Yet for most organisations, particularly those in government and health, it's impractical to replace their core legacy systems because of the huge costs involved and the critical information that has been collected over many years.

Companies are entering the next era of application optimisation thanks to the convergence of Service-Oriented Architectures (SOA), Web services and XML. SOA is not about building new systems, but giving end-users what they want from the systems already in place. To do this requires a fundamental shift in methodology.

The classic model

The classic IT implementation model typically follows a five point plan: define the business case; select a vendor and solution; scope out the project and allocate people; roll-out the software; then iron out any technical hurdles such as coding or integration.

It's usually a lengthy process that has to take on board a plethora of ideas, processes and aspirations, and any results are always at the end of the project, which may be years down the track (and by then, a company's goals have changed!). As Gartner points out, if you only deviate two per cent from your project goals each month, after a year you're already 24 per cent off target. And as projects drag on, as they invariably do, this figure increases.

SOA means that you can turn the classic model on its head. It simplifies the IT reform model to a three-point plan: decide what services the end-user needs; service-enable the existing software; and only finally, think about more fundamental systems change - if needed!

1. Look at what the end-user wants

With SOA, the starting point isn't new 'whiz-bang' technology. It starts at an operational level - asking the end-user what he/she needs to do their job. In terms of the iSoft project, doctors and nurses argue that the scheme has consistently failed to involve them in helping design the new systems, but they surely should be a principal focus right from the start.

Employees usually know the kind of information/knowledge they need at their fingertips in order to do their job effectively. In the contact centre market, for example, an agent may typically want five pieces of critical customer information before them each time they take a customer call, such as purchase history, financial account, previous calls, and other services used. Agents don't want to have to navigate multiple green screens to find out this information - yet figures show that 64 per cent of agents have to navigate through three or more applications during any one customer call. This leads to lost cross-sales, high call abandonment rates, and lengthy calls - all causes of customer and agent dissatisfaction.

It may be that the agent needs data from disparate systems - a CRM system, an accounts database, or a purchase order system - but with the SOA model, that doesn't matter.

2. Service-enable underlying software to give a service to the end-user

SOA tools allow you to service-enable existing software and give users the kind of information they need, in the format they need it, on a daily basis. It allows organisations to unlock data from their legacy systems, open it up to the people who most need it - across multiple sites and different organisations - and deliver it in the format that best suits their needs. This may mean gluing applications together so a purchase order system, for example, integrates with a CRM system to keep records up-to-the-minute and eliminates processing across lots of green screens. As a result the SOA service-enables existing IT investments to unify the underlying data silos and business processes across multiple applications.

How does this work? If an insurance organisation has a perfectly adequate legacy back-end claims processing system, it may find that it wants to bring part of its processes to the Web or to its call centre. By leveraging SOA to service-enable the legacy system, the insurance company can achieve rapid results - in a matter of days. Creating a Web-wrapper around the claims processing system opens it up so actions like checking claim history can be easily done online. The base functionality is still the same, the company doesn't lose any of its crucial customer data, what changes is the way in which it's being used, by both employees and customers.

3. Think about making more fundamental change

Organisations like the NHS can't simply shut up shop while they reform their technology systems. The same is true of any public sector organisation or any business; they can't take the risk of ripping out their core operating systems and throwing massive budgets, time and bodies at projects that don't deliver on what they set out to.

SOA eliminates this risk by delivering results at the beginning of a project. It's only when an organisation's taken the first two steps and the end-user has a useable, workable front-end, that it is then able to think about a more fundamental change to its IT infrastructure, if it's needed. And, because the organisation is already benefiting from better processes, it is in a position to make change on an ongoing basis and enter a cycle of constant improvement.

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