

Document Magazine Column?

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With this issue of Document focusing on Web 2, we would be remiss if we did not say something about what all this means to the world of BPM.

Whether you believe Web 2 is a significant departure from the original Web or merely a logical evolution of the tools that built Web 1, as Tim Berners-Lee, (the guy behind the WWW) believes, the tools that have come about have changed the application development landscape forever. In the past few years the cost of developing applications for all manner of business requirements has collapsed. More importantly, this is not just for applications that exist only for the Internet but for the day to day internal business applications that will never be open to public use.

This has come about by a combination of two factors that have the same root. First, the tools simply make it much easier and cheaper to build applications to begin with. Second, these same tools have been used to create services or components by third parties who make them available either on the Web or to purchase for internal use to help applications to achieve their intended purpose. This has created a marketplace for components or services that can be consumed by internally developed applications. In the case of Web based services, they can be informational, providing data needed by an application, in the case of components they can be functional, providing elements used to make the application work or, in the case BPM tools, orchestrating the applications use of services and keeping track of both execution and performance. Consequently, it is not unusual to see well engineered and executed projects cost less than half what traditional approaches cost and in some cases half the cost of buying an "off the shelf" application.

In the spectrum of BPM tools, the rules engines are particularly important to a services based architectures. Since the services approach can have many components with the inputs or results of one driving the next until a process is completed, rules engines are needed to efficiently manage and report against all of the resulting execution paths. Sure, some will say that we can do the same thing with a bunch of SQL statements but we'll leave that to a discussion of why dinosaurs became extinct.

Depending on your particular needs, there is a wide variety of such tools. These range from the usual BPM products to tools that focus on production rules requirements that serious application developers might want to consider. For those that look in the direction of Redmond, BizTalk has a rules engine appropriate for many situations. For the open source community SOAR is coming along nicely and for the JAVA crowd, Drools is fleshing out as a full fledged business logic platform. Any of these can be put to good use in building out all manner of applications to both orchestrate processes and provide process integrity.

Another cornerstone tool is BPEL (business process execution language) which is actually a shortened version of the full name which is WS-BPEL (WS for Web Service). This is a tool built purely for the Web world and once mastered is invaluable for efficiently constructing applications that will rely on Web based services whether they be out in the wild (Internet) or safely at home in your own network or a combination of these two environments.

But enough of the technical stuff. What should business process owners be concerned with? What is the business case? For starters, if your technical team starts talking about this approach and these tools then consider yourself lucky because this is the stuff the future is being built with. While it may take some time for proficiency to be gained, it is well worth the investment. What will be gained is the ability to design, develop and deploy applications or modifications to legacy applications that meet your business requirements in time frames thought impossible just five years ago. This means both significant cost savings and improved business velocity. Even more important is the enhanced flexibility to revise your processes on the fly by plugging in new or revised rules and services that extend and enhance applications without having to endure major rewrites or restructuring. Even your old legacy applications can be surrounded by the new environment extending the life of old systems or as a means to ease out of them module by module.

The bottom line is that your organization can re-engineer both applications and processes BPM continues to be the critical element to accomplish both.