

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The IT architectural world is user-driven and the rules of the game have changed, says Graham Oakes.



Graham Oakes: the IT department isn't driving adoption, it's simply trying to keep up with people

Something important happened last month. Something that could drive a big change in the way we think about technology services and integration. It was widely reported. A lot of people in the technical community noticed it. Yet no-one seems to have connected it to the way we define architecture.

Sony announced the price of Playstation 3.

The important thing isn't that Playstation 3 will be a powerful computer. It's not even that it will drive billions of dollars worth of software development. The important thing is that Playstation 3 is going to cost more than a reasonably well-configured PC.

Consoles used to be cheap devices that were designed for a single purpose. They could be manufactured to mass-market pricing. There was going to be a war between them and the more flexible (hence more expensive) PC to own the media centre of the household.

That war is still happening, but the parameters have changed. The console, if Sony has read things right, is going after the top end of style and design. The PC is going to be the workhorse, cheap-enough-for-anyone device. This is the miracle of commoditisation, and right now it's working for the PC and against Sony.

If this was just about games, its relevance to enterprise architectures might be dubious. But it's part of a larger trend. For example:

- Web 2.0. Even allowing for the 99% hype factor, there's real stuff happening here. Mash-ups are about user-driven integration. People use that workhorse: they configure things for themselves, in ways that no-one imagined when they were building the underlying services.
- Technology infiltration. Fifteen years ago, my company gave me a mobile phone. Only companies could afford them. These days, I take my own phone to work. Mobile email infiltrated because people bought their own Blackberries. Instant messaging, blogs, wikis – the IT department isn't driving adoption, it's simply trying to keep up with people. And the 'clickerati' generation, the 12-year-olds who don't remember a time without mobile phones, haven't even begun to make demands of the corporate helpdesk...

Some of this is enterprise-driven (I have a client who will do cool stuff as they integrate their e-commerce systems with eBay's web services). We pay lip service to it when we define SOAs. Then we act as if service provision and choreography is going to happen in a controlled environment.

I see a kind of Maginot Line when I look at the complexity layered into 'WS' standards. We're fighting the last war, one where lumbering IT departments faced each other across monolithic interfaces. We've thought up a better kind of trench system. Is this the way to make the miracle of commoditisation work for people?

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