

TOOL WARS

Graham Oakes says it is not just your choice of modelling tool that can impact on a software project.



Graham Oakes: tools can get in the way of solving issues

It's hard to discuss SOA without fighting the odd tool war. Everyone has their preferred modelling language, their preferred repository, their preferred reference model, and so on. A lot of heated debate results.

One thing I've noticed about these debates: business specialists run away when they begin. They couldn't care less about UML or BPML. And even if you could afford to give them licences for your chosen modelling tool, they wouldn't use it.

They've got better things to do than learn a new, highly complex notation and toolset. They want stuff documented in a language they already understand, using tools they already know – PowerPoint or Word.

These simple tools are far from perfect. They don't check for syntax errors. They don't identify obvious gaps and inconsistencies. They don't support generations of multiple views from a single underlying 'truth'. They don't help you manage complex configurations of system elements over a sustained lifecycle. However, these are rarely the things that kill your integration efforts.

It's things like the following that kill your projects:

- **Working at cross-purposes.** Different parts of the team work to different objectives. They may think their objectives are the same, but their language hides divergences. Timescales are a classic example: my 'medium term' may be the impossibly distant future for someone whose main focus is making this quarter's sales target.
- **Poor partitioning of services.** This could mean dividing up services in ways that don't align to the ways people actually work, getting the level of granularity wrong, conflating concerns that are quite distinct, or failing to recognise commonalities that apply across multiple domains.

No tool can do this analysis for you – it requires skill, both intellectual (to unravel the complexities of a typical enterprise) and social (to bring together the perspectives of multiple stakeholders).

- **Lack of courage to speak truth to the powerful.** You know things are going wrong, but you don't tell anyone. So they don't get fixed and projects crash. A necessary preamble to effective dialogue with powerful stakeholders is spending time building a relationship. Time spent in front of a modelling tool rarely contributes to this.

Modelling tools mostly get in the way of solving such issues. Their steep learning curve encourages you to focus on notations at precisely the time you should be focusing on business objectives.

They have their place: their rigour, for example, can force you to clarify details that would otherwise be overlooked until much later. But this place comes only after more fundamental problems have been solved.

Until then, remember the old saying: 'A fool with a tool is still a fool'.

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