

ENJOYING THE SERVICE

What can SOA developers learn from the Apple iPhone? Graham Oakes explains.



Graham Oakes: all too often, people refuse to use the applications

Why has the iPhone gathered so much attention? It doesn't have the highest market share of any mobile phone (or even any smartphone). It doesn't do anything that can't be done by other phones. It just feels nice when you use it.

So maybe the iPhone isn't for business users – it's just a consumer toy, right? Then why are IT managers so concerned about managing the iPhones that people are bringing into their enterprises 'via the back door'?

This is reminiscent of the CRM marketplace. Once upon a time, we managed customers. Now we deliver experiences to them.

Mobile phones have stopped being about functionality and started to be about experiences. These days, you expect any phone to handle your communication needs. To be differentiated, it has to be enjoyable.

In this world of customer experiences, I'm beginning to wonder if SOA can deliver the goods. The promise of SOA is essentially utilitarian – by exploiting common services, we enable organisations to deploy functionality more rapidly and cost-effectively. That's good in so far as it goes, but does it go far enough?

SOA draws our focus inwards, onto functionality. We may pay lip service to people, perhaps drawing a few 'use cases' along the way, but we're really focusing on abstracting common blocks of functionality that our systems can deliver. Someone is expected to come along later and string together these services into applications that people will actually use.

Yet all too often, people refuse to use the applications. Or they do so only under duress.

Ask anyone who's recently been migrated to a new ERP application – for all their talk of service oriented underpinnings, no-one would ever use one of these beasts out of choice. Organisations mandate their use in the (sometimes forlorn) hope that there will be cost savings somewhere along the way.

This worked when companies provided the technology and people just had to live with it. But these days, people buy their own technology.

Most people wander the streets with about a mainframe's worth of computer power in their handbags. If we expect these people to use our systems, we need to build better interfaces. Not just usable – enjoyable.

That doesn't mean we should drop SOA. The basic premise – rapid deployment of functionality – is still good. For all of Apple's design skills, the iPhone would have failed if it didn't work. But we need to change the way we deploy SOA.

In my current project, we're designing services not simply to deliver functionality. We're working with user experience (UE) specialists to design services which create affordances for interface design. These UE specialists then develop applications that will delight the user. I think this is the way SOA must evolve.

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