

A TWO-WAY STREET?

Graham Oakes thinks it's a mistake to see service oriented architecture as a mere commodity.



Graham Oakes: issues such as privacy and outsourcing are pushing service orientation into the limelight

Some time in the last couple of years, power got sexy. Electricity used to epitomise the most boring commodity – just push in a standard plug and out it flowed. Now it carries a load of other connotations. Electricity overheats our data centres. It creates CO2. Its supply isn't always as reliable as we'd like, even in 'advanced' countries like the UK or USA.

So just as people were starting to say "IT is infrastructure – why do you need a special department to run it, you don't have a director of electricity?", electricity started to find its way into boardroom conversations...

This got me thinking about the other elements of our infrastructure – particularly the service oriented infrastructure we're all supposed to be building for our organisations. Can we really just push things like routing and message transformation down into the infrastructure and leave them to commoditise away into relative insignificance?

Commoditisation isn't always a one-way street. Changes come along which push supposed commodities back into prominence. It's happened to power several times over history. Water power gave way to coal and the whole geography of industries changed dramatically. It's happening again now – people are siting their data centres based on the availability and price of power.

The history of application integration, on the other hand, looks more like a one-way street. We started with a complex, hand-coded spaghetti of interconnections. Then we shifted to expensive, proprietary EAI. Next, open standards-based CORBA appeared, tripped up and re-emerged as open standards-based SOA.

Once upon a time programmers didn't think about integrating their code because it wasn't possible. Now programmers (well, maybe at the leading edge) don't think about integrating their code because it's so easy.

This is all good, of course. Fragmented data and processes don't help any of us, as organisations or as customers or citizens. But what are the pressures lurking away that might force us to rethink the way we integrate, pushing service orientation into the limelight?

Privacy is one. Integrated customer data may be valuable, but only if customers are confident that the data holders will not abuse their knowledge. Could business models based on dis-integrated data emerge?

Outsourcing is another factor. As service provision shifts from customer to vendor, the vendor gains a lot of control. I've seen a couple of organisations hit by the dynamics of outsourcing what subsequently became a core, strategic capability.

Both these examples are about a different type of power – the power balance that shifts between customer and supplier. I'm sure there are other pressures out there. What is it about your service infrastructure that's going to cause the geography of your industry to shift? And how are you going to manage that shift?

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