

MATURE OR JUST IRRELEVANT?

Graham Oakes wonders whether SOA and BPM are coming into their own or heading over the hill.



Graham Oakes: we're moving increasingly towards an economy where information is the product

The intersection of SOA and BPM (business process management) is an interesting place right now. After maturing for the last 10 years or more (SOA from its roots in object oriented and then component-based development; BPM from the early, rather limited workflow engines), these two trends are finally starting to look like viable approaches to delivering that holy grail – business flexibility. Now we need to work out how to combine the two.

In some ways, this looks like the dilemma that is challenging Lego enthusiasts the world over. Is it better to start with a bunch of blocks and build whatever you can with the components in hand, or should you start with a kit that defines the overall vision and build to this plan?

I'll leave it for the reader to ponder the creativity and power of each approach. I'm more interested in the possibility that the two approaches have matured just as they've

become irrelevant.

I have this theory that organisations which deliver physical products benefit enormously from structured processes. It's no mistake, for example, that waves of process innovation have arisen in the automotive industry, from the Model T to the Toyota Way. Where your information supports management of a physical product, then it too can be managed in a structured way.

However, when information is itself the product, it's not so clear cut. How many enterprise content management projects, for example, start out with people enthusiastically elaborating their editorial workflows, only to turn off virtually all workflow during live operations because it gets in the way of people doing their jobs?

When managing information as an end in its own right, it seems to work best to define roles and a few clear stage gates, then to stand back and let people collaborate. That's like creating a service for 'magic happens here'.

Some industries have addressed this dilemma by throwing money at it. Financial products, for example, are mostly information, yet many of them are managed in highly structured ways.

Likewise, pharmaceutical companies have invested heavily in structuring the information flows through their research pipelines. Yet even here collaboration often prevails – informality reigns on the trading floor and in the research lab.

We're moving increasingly towards an economy where information is the product. Even as we improve approaches like SOA and BPM, value is shifting from structured information to collaborative research and learning. We may be as far as ever from finding the holy grail.

● *Enterprise Integration, SOA & Web Services Evaluation Centre Expert Dr Graham Oakes is the principal of content management, product development and customer service strategies consultancy Graham Oakes Ltd. Email: graham@grahamoakes.co.uk. Website: www.grahamoakes.co.uk.*