



Dave Chadwick discovers from Fujitsu Software's Chief Architect, Keith Swenson that companies should...

GO WITH THE FLOW

WORKFLOW AND BUSINESS PROCESS Management (BPM) may both seem to have passed their prime as the leading edge, but that could be about to change – even if this time they're likely to live in the shadow of sexier ideas like Service Oriented Architectures and Web Services.

One reason is the growing necessity within business for compliance and accountability, particularly in the wake of scandals such as Enron and WorldCom. This is illustrated by recent regulations and legislation such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in the US covering financial audits, the Basel-II framework for managing risk in worldwide banking and the UK's Higgs report, which reviews the role of non-executive directors and audit committees.

To get a better understanding of this market and the technologies that are driving it, we spoke to workflow expert Keith Swenson, Chief Architect of Fujitsu Software. Among his other credentials, he is also lead author of the Asynchronous Service Access Protocol (ASAP), chair of the OASIS ASAP Technical Committee, and chairman of the Workflow Management Coalition (wfMC) Wf-XML Working Group. This year Keith was awarded the Marvin L Manheim Award for his contributions to the field of workflow from the wfMC.

Swenson is bullish about workflow, quoting US analyst reports that state it is the fastest growing IT market, expanding at 40 percent a year. "It's especially driven by Sarbanes-Oxley and other legislation", says Swenson. "Sarbanes-Oxley is all about making sure the proper procedures are put into place to make sure that the numbers that you're presenting outside are correct. So, the CEO of a corporation is going to be liable. That person is going to want to make sure that the correct procedure has been used within that company and that the correct people have signed off on that procedure at the correct time. That's workflow, that's what workflow's all about."

Swenson defines BPM as a stage further on from workflow, providing the ability to measure and improve the processes used. "Workflow is about informing people about what they need to do and giving them the information to do it, then



Keith Swenson,
Chief Architect of
Fujitsu Software

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getting the results of their work. BPM provides analytics that tell you how well processes are doing and simulation to try out different processes".

Workflow and BPM, as well as Web services in general, are set to get a technical boost from ASAP, which will provide a standard way for Web Services to operate asynchronously. It will be useful in scenarios where a service takes some time to complete. It will enable asynchronous services to be started, monitored, cancelled and completed.

ASAP is built on basic SOAP messaging and completion of the standard has been delayed while other related standards are finalised. "It's hung up on ws-addressing. It's almost mind-boggling, but there is no standard way to address a SOAP message. SOAP itself is just the envelope to the message structure", explains Swenson. "It's so easy to invent a way to send this around that basically what has happened is that everybody has done it a different way."

Ws-addressing has been submitted to the W3C by BEA Systems, IBM, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems; and Swenson expects it will take around 6 months before it is ratified. Workflow system vendors are then certain to implement ASAP. "That's kind of a no-brainer", comments Swenson.

The only issue he foresees is that some people confuse the capabilities of ASAP with the Business Process Execution Language (BPEL). "These should not be viewed as competitors. BPEL is a language that can be used to describe any exchange of messages. It's a set of instructions that tell a computer what to do. ASAP on the other hand is a description of particular messages and what they mean. You could use BPEL to implement ASAP", he explains.

Two complimentary standards that are being worked on, wf-XML 2.0 and the XML Process Definition Language (XPDL), will provide standard ways for business analysts to pick up a process definition from a remote workflow or BPM system, edit it in a process design tool, and then put it back. "Right now workflow functions primarily as independent islands. Wf-xml is really going to allow the linking of those islands", comments Swenson.

A further standard being worked on, the XML Business Reporting Language (XBRL), will provide a standard format for communicating financial information from organisation to organisation, and BPMN will give a standard graphical notation for business procedures.

It's an old idea, but with the W3C, OASIS, the wfMC, XBRL.org and BPMI.org all involved in these standards efforts, the obvious thing that's missing is for someone to standardise the standards bodies. Maybe I'll fax my Euro MP [you'll send a SOAP message to him through Port 80, surely? – Ed]... ■