



GETTING INTO WEB SERVICES

IT'S ALL ABOUT STANDARDIZING THE WAY IN WHICH APPLICATIONS INTEGRATE WITH ONE ANOTHER

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We can all agree that the technology industry is highly prone toward the hyperbolic. Ballyhooed “killer apps” and “must-have” technologies of the past have frequently gone down in flames, or simply been snuffed out by the wet blanket of over expectation and unfulfilled promise.

So, it's only appropriate that we ask, “Is there something about Web Services that is different?”

What's it About?

Web Services is an exceptionally broad topic that has frequently been at the center of exaggerated and confusing rhetoric. The vision is grand, indeed, but don't be daunted; there is much to be gained from understanding and adopting the basic principles.

Make no mistake, Web Services will be a revolutionary leap forward in the way companies' architect, develop, buy, and connect applications. But, don't let the word “revolutionary” scare you. There are evolutionary steps along the path that unlock tremendous business value. Change can be introduced incrementally, and in a way can be fully accommodative of legacy environments.

The grand vision of Web Services typically encompasses componentization, code reuse, and connecting with applications outside the firewall. Again, don't be frightened; those are peripheral and optional elements of a Web Services strategy. Fundamentally, Web Services is about standardizing the way in which applications integrate with one another.

Adoption will likely happen in three phases. Most will choose to first Web Service-enable selected “inside the firewall” applications in order to promote better intra-organizational data flow. Subsequently, businesses will begin to connect “outside the firewall” with customers, suppliers, and partners. Finally, a market will emerge in which individuals and organizations can dynamically discover new business partners and transact with them on the fly. Of course, specific situations may dictate a different order.

All of this is possible because of real, industry-wide agreement on the basic, Web Services-enabling standards and protocols. If you doubt the potential catalytic impact of such concurrence, just look at what happened the last time there was similar unanimity—the Internet and World Wide Web became universally viable and life/business transforming entities. XML and SOAP, the foundational protocols of Web Services, will do for Web Services what TCP/IP, HTTP, and HTML did for the Internet and Web.



Why Do We Need It?

Over the past two decades, there has been a tremendous proliferation of new applications and application categories. Unfortunately, industry-wide convergence around key standards has progressed at a much slower rate. The outcome of such an unequal pace of evolution has been a best-of-breed-driven hodgepodge of application silos that have been built and/or deployed without an interconnected and interoperable world in mind. As a result, companies have phenomenal amounts of data, but no seamless way to move that data between applications, inside or outside organizational boundaries. Therefore, the ability to synthesize and analyze information has been seriously impeded, forcing businesses to operate sub-optimally.

It is also exceedingly difficult and time consuming to integrate new software into today's highly heterogeneous application environments. As a consequence, companies are much less responsive to competitive pressures, as well as customer and partner needs.

Web Services-enabled applications, with their standard interfaces, can enable organizations to determine suitability on the basis of business, rather than technical characteristics, largely eliminating vendor lock-in.

How To Benefit Today.

First, get your arms around your overall application environment. Make an effort to identify and understand your software assets, how they are architected, how they do or do not communicate with one another, and how they are linked to your business processes. There are solutions in the marketplace that can facilitate and automate the aforementioned. Even if you end up going no further down the Web Services path, such an effort can pay enormous dividends in terms of providing a knowledgebase that will simplify and expedite future development and integration projects.

Second, get familiar with XML and SOAP. Pick a couple of existing applications that you would like to integrate. Modify them such that they can pass data via XML and connect via SOAP. This can be done manually, or with a variety of tools in the marketplace that make possible the wrapping of applications with XML and SOAP interfaces.

Above all, get in the game. Web Services is much more than the latest industry catchphrase. It addresses and solves one of the most fundamental business problems of all-seamless information flow. The technology is real, as is its support across the industry. Competitiveness is on the line.