

Hitting the Road Again

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In a couple of recent articles I have written about the growing propensity for all kinds of consumer electronics devices to have overlapping features. Phones can be radios and satellite navigation systems whilst personal organisers try to double as cameras and phones etc. Whilst this makes life interesting for the gadget enthusiast, the boundaries of form and function can get very blurred and sometimes it only serves to remind us that some things are best done with a dedicated tool designed specifically for the job. In fact often the extra features are primarily there to aid the sales process either to differentiate products from their competitors or to create demand for upgrades.

It is interesting to observe how this phenomenon mirrors the development of overlapping functionality in business software. What we find here is that many packages have overlapping capabilities, spreadsheets can act as databases, accounts packages hold product and customer information and sales order processing systems can create web pages and so on.

Superficially this wealth of options can seem like good value, and obviously each vendor will be very persuasive of the merits of their particular offering. However there is an insidious problem associated with too much choice when it comes to the fundamental aspects of business systems. It is usually far more efficient and cost effective to solve problems like file storage, network security, database management and web hosting once for the whole organisation but this is rarely what actually happens. In most organisations there will be several competing approaches to the key elements of data management. The result is that efforts to provide a more joined up approach to both management and customer service always prove to be far more difficult and frustrating than anyone expects.

So how does one cut through the competing claims of each of these technologies to find a coherent IS strategy that can deliver in the long term? Sometimes it helps to pare things right down to their essential features. For example, filing - something computers should be supremely good at - is often a huge problem because each application stores things in a different format, organised in a different way. So in order to join up our communications we have to find a way to link emails stored on a groupware server with database records from various business systems with letters filed in a windows file system.

It is also important to understand that the IT industry as a whole is not necessarily all that keen on solving the underlying problems. The usual answer is to layer on yet more complex applications such as middleware servers, CRM packages and document management applications to join up the underlying mess. But there is an alternative; it's just not as profitable or as easy as selling a shiny new system and then running for cover.

Rather than accepting application specific information stores as inevitable we can turn the problem on its head by insisting on a single data storage mechanism regardless of the business process. This breaks the link between individual departments and the processes they carry out, and the data they need to work with. In other words filing information effectively is a service provided centrally whilst working with the information on a day by day basis will be process specific. Once you have embraced this idea it is then a matter of time and good management to move to a system in which information and processes are more joined up, more auditable and much easier to protect.

The combination of database server and web browser is particularly powerful in that it provides a simple, low maintenance model for two seemingly incompatible requirements. On the one hand the need to centralise and rationalise the support requirements for core systems and on the other side the need to distribute access to functions and data more widely.

In effect the concept of the network computer much talked about by Oracle, Sun and others six or seven years ago in an attempt to unseat Windows, may now be reinterpreted in the interests of simpler more integrated systems. And although things are rarely that simple in real life, the underlying principle is difficult to fault. In practice these ideas are becoming far easier to put into practice and are talked about in the industry under the guise of 'service oriented architectures', 'web services' and so on. From a customer perspective the important thing is to understand that the best business systems of the future are likely to be less complex to use and more joined up behind the scenes.