Feature Article:

Marrying your Legacy Environment with the New Internet

By Eden Watt

Maintaining the beasts in the back room (AKA legacy systems) and figuring out how to integrate those beasts with all the latest internet technologies is a typical IS job requirement today. And I use the term "internet technologies" loosely because this has become a very broad topic over the last decade.

Now that just about every organization, large and small, has internet email with web browser access and a company web site, the focus is on incorporating B2C and B2B functionality, using CRM and eCRM principles, automating supply chain interactions with Internet-based EDI, XML, and Web Services, and, of course, taking advantage of new Wireless capabilities for roaming users.

In moving forward with any of these new technologies, a critical success factor will be how well you have designed the integration to your back end legacy systems that are still the life and breath of your day to day business operations.

For many of us, that means implementing these solutions with tight interaction to iSeries, RPG or COBOL, DB2/400 based application suites. With the press and so many vendors touting solutions that need to run on Windows and Unix Servers, sometimes this can be confusing; however, all of these capabilities are available for the iSeries platform using both IBM and IBM iSeries partners' software solutions.

And, it goes without saying that you will have a much easier job of accomplishing dynamic integration to your business applications suite if you implement your internet solutions on the same platform. Maintenance, over time, will also be easier and less costly for your organization in this scenario.

So what are the opportunities for your company to reap the benefits of eCommerce? Here's a rundown of some of the new internet requirements, keeping in mind that sometimes organizations are considering these technologies

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because they want to be ahead of the curve, but just as often they are in a reactive mode, responding to competitive or customer pressures.

1. **Customer or Supplier Self Service** – All companies today have web sites where their customers and trading partners can go to get information about them. A large number of organizations have more than just static information on their site. Dynamic integration with legacy systems, which expose browser-based interfaces for direct customer or partner interaction can produce big cost savings and internal efficiencies in transaction processing. Other benefits, such as improved customer service, will also be realized.

Often these interfaces will be password protected, but accessible directly over the internet without any requirement to dial into your systems.

There are two primary interfaces that will need to be supported, going forward, to allow external partners access to your system interfaces:

- PC-based Web Browsers, using IE or Netscape, which can be very graphically and functionally rich, using a variety of interface languages and tools, such as HTML, DHTML, XML, JavaScript and Java.

- Wireless Browsers, using a wide range of browsers – such as Eudora, AvantGo, IE, Go.Web, and so on – which could be deployed on devices with Palm OS, Windows CE, RIM, or other technologies, including WAP-enabled cell phones. These user interfaces will be much more limited, probably with no graphics and minimal data entry capabilities and much smaller screens.

2. **B2B Automation or Web Services Enablement**.– Statistics indicate that approximately 20% of organizations today are exchanging EDI transactions with approximately 20% of their trading partners.

The way of the future is for all organizations to exchange electronic transactions with 100% of their trading partners, using newer technologies like XML and Web Services.

Many standards, such as SOAP, ebXML, OASIS, and others are paving the way for this future but it will take time. Major industry players like IBM, Microsoft, and Sun are committed to Web Services and are incorporating this into all of their future product offerings.

In addition, vertical industry marketplaces, registries, portals, and regulations, are forcing some companies to do business using XML via intermediaries.

Some examples of this are UCCNet (for retail and manufacturers/ distributers) and Covisint (for automotive suppliers).

Tremendous advantages can be gained by appropriate use of the latest internet technologies but without integration to your core legacy or ERP systems environment, you may be in for more headaches than you had bargained for.

If the iSeries is your core business production platform, then look at solutions that can easily extend that environment to the internet. Your company needs your technical savvy to pave the way for internet integration. Organizations who are not constantly looking at new ways to do business efficiently, may not be in business for the long run. TUG

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Hear more about Wireless on the iSeries, at the next TUG MoM, November 20, 0202.