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THE OPEN APPLICATIONS GROUP *BUSINESS OBJECT DOCUMENTS FILL A CRITICAL B2B ROLE*

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Abstract

The vision of the Open Applications Group, Inc. (OAGI) is to facilitate Business-to-Business (B2B) and Application-to-Application (A2A) integration by introducing a set of Business Object Documents (BODs) that specify integration requirements to the point that systems can be “plug and play” in the same manner that desktop systems now can support arbitrary hardware devices. OAGI initiatives play well with ebXML and RosettaNet efforts and can be used as a quick step-up towards B2B integration.

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Application-to-Application (A2A) and B2B Integration

There are a number of major initiatives that simplify, standardize, and enable eBusiness systems to interoperate, but none have the rich track history of delivery of the **Open Applications Group, Inc.** (OAGI). The OAGI initiative was launched in 1994 by a number of large ERP vendors who were struggling with the integration of their packaged application into their customer's legacy infrastructures. Most users and vendors seriously underestimated the effort that it took to install a packaged ERP into a customer's infrastructure. In the process, both users and vendors got bloodied with the reputation of high cost and complexity of implementation. To solve these problems, these vendors got together and attempted to figure out a methodology and set of technical specifications for common application integration.

As a result, the OAGI was founded as a non-profit consortium whose focus is on best practices and processes for XML-based eBusiness and Application Integration. With mostly application vendors forming the core of OAGI membership, the goal of the organization is to enable the integration of packaged applications within the group members and with legacy systems. The end result of this work is a repeatable process for quickly developing high quality business content and XML representations of that content. Currently, there are over 70 vendor members, and a growing base of end user customers such as Boeing and Ford. These end-users form a significant contingent of manufacturing industry participants. In most eBusiness specifications efforts, manufacturing industry problems tend to be fixed first, but since ERP is the generic driver for OAGI specifications, other non-manufacturing industry participants, such as NationsBank, are also drawn to the specification work. The focus of OAGI brings together the domain expertise of these various industries together with the software vendors who can implement it.

In the vocabulary and nomenclature of OAGI, their vision is to allow two sorts of integration: Business-to-Business (B2B) and Application-to-Application (A2A) software integration. Most business users are unaware of the technical sophistication required to integrate major software systems. The increasing need to manipulate and exchange data has driven this desire to integrate previously isolated systems. OAGI hopes to introduce a set of **Business Object Documents (BODs)** that specify these integration requirements to the point that systems can be "plug and play" in the same manner that desktop systems now can support arbitrary hardware devices.

Business Object Documents (BODs)

These BODs were created in three major steps. The first step was to establish a common model for the various integration specifications. Next, the group tackled the business scope that the specifications would initially include, and then embarked on the challenging task of

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defining and agreeing on the business interface data and process requirements. Finally, these specifications would be introduced to the customer as a means of “real-world testing” the specifications. This last feature is a distinguishing characteristic of the OAGI – their mainline group members are not only building the specifications, but are also real world testing them as they are being developed.

The early efforts of the group used a proprietary meta-language for defining these specifications prior to the announcement of XML in 1996. When they realized XML provided the same, if not better, functionality for defining data exchange, they quickly put their support behind XML as their definition schema. Since this switch happened very early in OAGI's specification lifecycle, they claim to have the largest number of published, XML-based business interoperability schema of any industry standards organization.

From a business integration perspective, the OAGI efforts compete in some regards with the products and services delivered by Ariba and Commerce One. However, OAGI views the integration issues as not being a problem of interoperability between software vendors, but rather as interoperability with the vendors' customers. They believe that if the integration solution is not based in what the customers are actually doing, then all the specification work is a waste of time. To this end, while the auto vendors implemented Commerce One as their marketplace solution for the Covisint project, the actual integration specifications were done using OAGI specs. As of August 2001, there are over 180 BODs that have been developed through the voluntary contribution of OAGI members. This work covers the basic “waterfront” of messages to be exchanged including factory execution, e-Catalogs, shipping, purchase orders, invoicing, and a large variety of messages that are generic in nature. Rather than attacking the problem from the points of view of individual industries, the work groups used the notion that the ERP system formed the core and generic base-line application that is used cross-industry. Thus, messages were created to support the ERP implementation rather than specific industry application. As a result, most schema have been developed for a wide context of users.

StarXML: Industry Focus

In August 2001, the OAGI launched a new effort called **StarXML**. The idea is that while specification work can be done more effectively through a consortium, users want to get to an end result of system integration in a predictable fashion. The StarXML initiative attempts to satisfy that need. Sponsored by the retail and auto industries, the goal of StarXML is not only to develop messages and BODs, but to rationalize and normalize them for use by a particular industry – in essence to move from theory to practice. Using the ebXML framework as a means for transporting messages, the StarXML community is developing an OAGI-based implementation that is under their sponsorship and has a set of direct deliverables for this group. Thus, whereas OAGI represents a generic approach to B2B and A2A integration, StarXML represents a specific implementation targeted at specific user communities.

Interaction with other Standards Efforts

In many ways, OAGI is similar to other major industry eBusiness efforts such as RosettaNet and ebXML. However, OAGI differentiates itself from these two specific initiatives in a number of ways. Primarily, OAGI defines RosettaNet as a “sponsored initiative” rather than a broad, standards effort. As a result of focusing on specific industries in the Information Technology supply chain, RosettaNet has produced a number of focused specifications as a framework for implementation that meets the IT-specific needs. According to OAGI, RosettaNet's main challenge will be in trying to broaden the use of the specifications to other verticals. OAGI is adamant about remaining industry-independent and producing a core set of specifications revolving around the ERP system, rather than specific industry. In the OAGI community, any user that wants to specify a message or BOD development can do so by simply issuing a call-

to-action, drumming up collaborators, and going through standardized development methodology. The community can then vote on the BOD for issues of continuity and reuse.

In addition, their neutrality to transport mechanism and frameworks has allowed them to employ transports such as Email, CORBA, and alternative middleware platforms. In principal, they don't care how users chose to deploy their specifications. In certain B2B situations, where they have a homogeneous user population, they can justify infrastructure specifications, but in others they can maintain neutrality and flexibility. In the early days, RosettaNet required its users to implement the RosettaNet Implementation Framework (RNIF) as a means to transport, route, and package XML messages. The RNIF was a framework that specified parameters for message sequencing and timeouts that were hard-coded. However, recently RosettaNet has stated they will migrate their installed base to the increasingly popular ebXML framework.

OAGI and ebXML

OAGI also likes the consensus, open standards characteristics of the ebXML initiative. The ebXML initiative is a broad, XML-based proposal to implement a set of standard business dialogues and interfaces that businesses have to their internal and external systems. These are done in a variety of levels that encapsulate needs ranging from transport, routing, and packaging to specific industry vertical vocabularies. It also includes features such as registries and repositories for business information and definitions of business processes. The ebXML initiative also works well with industry vertical efforts in that it gives them a place to present their offering within the ebXML framework. In this manner, OAGI will use the ebXML framework as a means of transporting their BODs.

However, many in the industry believe that ebXML is not quite ready for "prime time". Some components are fully developed and ready for production deployment, while others are still on the drawing table. For example, the messaging and transport components are very well developed, but the Core Components project is going to need a lot more work before it can be implemented in any capacity. In addition, many believe that the ebXML group made a big mistake in stopping the work they accomplished as part of their 18 month-long delivery cycle in Vienna, Austria. Many think that another six to nine months of development would have significantly matured the specification and made it more apt for adoption. As a result, many groups are using portions of the ebXML specification, but not quite the entire thing.

Since ebXML was founded under premise of individual contribution and not corporate contribution, it watered down the interest of those who manufactured the products and applications that were to implement the specification. People are not building their own applications anymore, and so it behooves all specifications efforts to get the early buy-in of application vendors. This was the primary motive behind OAGI's early embracing of software vendors into their specification efforts. Many standards efforts have not only ignored the contributions of application vendors, but have practically shunned them. Early on in the development process, RosettaNet actively banned software vendors from participating in the standards effort. OAGI sees this as a fatal flaw that can only hurt their chances of adoption. OAGI believes that standards efforts should focus on the drivers of software industry, such as SAP, JD Edwards, Microsoft, Oracle, and IBM, not necessarily the end users such as Boeing and Ford. The crucial software layer needs to be influenced, not their 50,000 customers.

Despite these differences, OAGI has been working with both RosettaNet and ebXML in attempts to unify and simplify the application integration process for its community members. It is very likely that their approach of focusing on the application as the point of integration, and doing so in a cross-industry, generic manner will allow them to achieve their goal of "plug-and-play" application and system interoperability.

Key Conclusions & Recommendations

- The OAGI specification have considerable and increasing backing for B2B integration by software vendors as well as large end-user customers (Boeing, Ford)
- OAGI's cooperation and openness in working with other standards organizations including RosettaNet and ebXML make it a safe bet for adoption.
- Customers looking to implement best practices for B2B integration should investigate OAGI for applicability. No doubt, the space is very confused and highly fluid, as a result, companies with pressures to integrate in short time frames may find OAGI BODs to be a quick shortcut to a successful integration.

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Related Research

- *Service-Oriented Integration* Report (ZTR-WS103)
- *RosettaNet* ZapNote (ZTZN-0100)
- *Infoteria* ZapNote (ZTZN-0107)

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About ZapThink, LLC

ZapThink is an IT market intelligence firm that provides trusted advice and critical insight into XML, Web Services, and Service Orientation. We provide our target audience of IT vendors, service providers and end-users a clear roadmap for standards-based, loosely coupled distributed computing – a vision of IT meeting the needs of the agile business.

ZapThink's role is to help companies understand these IT products and services in the context of SOAs and the vision of Service Orientation. ZapThink provides market intelligence to IT vendors who offer XML and Web Services-based products to help them understand their competitive landscape and how to communicate their value proposition to their customers within the context of Service Orientation, and lay out their product roadmaps for the coming wave of Service Orientation. ZapThink also provides implementation intelligence to IT users who are seeking guidance and clarity into how to assemble the available products and services into a coherent roadmap to Service Orientation. Finally, ZapThink provides demand intelligence to IT vendors and service providers who must understand the needs of IT users as they follow the roadmap to Service Orientation.

ZapThink's senior analysts are widely regarded as the "go to analysts" for XML, Web Services, and SOAs by vendors, end-users, and the press. They are in great demand as speakers, and have presented at conferences and industry events around the world. They are among the most quoted industry analysts in the IT industry.

ZapThink was founded in October 2000 and is headquartered in Waltham, Massachusetts. Its customers include Global 1000 firms, public sector organizations around the world, and many emerging businesses. ZapThink Analysts have years of experience in IT as well as research and analysis. Its analysts have previously been with such firms as IDC and ChannelWave, and have sat on the working group committees for standards bodies such as RosettaNet, UDDI, CPExchange, ebXML, EIDX, and CompTIA.

Call, email, or visit the ZapThink Web site to learn more about how ZapThink can help you to better understand how XML and Web Services impact your business or organization.

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