The Future of SOA - Part 6 of 7

Keith Harrison-Broninski

The first fundamental advances in personal productivity since the arrival of the spreadsheet

This article continues a series on gaining genuine business advantage (rather than just technical advantage) from **Service-Orientated Architecture** (SOA), a series that began with Is your SOAP turning to SOUP?.

I have been arguing that current approaches to SOA are fundamentally flawed. The fundamental problem is that they all treat business activities as a set of tasks organized into a flowchart. In reality, organizational life is both more complex and simpler than this. It is more complex because: work of all kinds is more like a set of interacting objects than a flowchart. It is simpler because: work of all kinds is more like a set of interacting objects than a flowchart.

This is not just me being a smart-alec (read wise-ass, if you're in the US). Flowcharts may seem simple, but their poor match to reality makes them inappropriate as a foundation for business process implementation. Even in routine, repetitive work (what Human Interaction Management calls "mechanistic"), to which flowcharts are most suited, there are always a plethora of exception cases - and Pareto's rule tells us that it is the 20% of exceptions that cause 80% of the costs. And when it comes to adaptive, innovative, interactive human work (what Human Interaction Management calls "human-driven"), flowcharts do nothing but get in the way.

If SOA is to deliver on its promises, it needs to deal properly not only with the exception cases - the edge cases that inevitably fall out to human handling - but also with the human work that at present is the biggest obstacle to improving organizational efficiency. Contrary to how it might seem, SOA is in fact an ideal technology tool for improving both of these areas.

In both edge cases and human-driven processes, the work consists of a business process in which participants play Roles, via which they each have access to specific documents and other forms of data. Crucially, the definition of these Roles does not derive from a set of flowcharts, but on *goals and responsibilities*. Each Role has various overall goals and responsibilities, which taken together must satisfy the goals and responsibilities of the process as a whole. A participant creates documents/data while playing a Role - in each case with certain of those goals and responsibilities in mind. Participants exchange documents/data via Interactions between their Roles - again, in each case with specific goals and responsibilities in mind.

This is a new way of looking at business processes, leads to new and exciting principles and patterns for process description, and offers all sorts of advantages to the business. Not only does it scale down, to the lowest-level routine processes, but it scales up, to the highest-level strategy and tactics of the organization as a whole. At both ends of the scale, services can be used to great advantage by partially or fully automating key parts of the business process. In my next article for bptrends.com, I will conclude this series on SOA by considering how a goal-directed approach to business modelling can be used to tame the Minotaur: truly integrate organizational management with the IT backbone.

TAKE AWAY

The way forward for SOA is to adopt an approach to modelling business activities that:

- Has natural support for human-driven activity

- Starts by defining goals and responsibilities, not a set of tasks to be carried out

- At a high-level, is based on business objects rather than flowcharts

- Allows low-level flowchart-type processes to be integrated into a cohesive model of organizational operations.

One immediate benefit of such an approach is that ROI on SOA initiatives can be maximized. Not only can services be developed to support a larger group of business processes - i.e., human-driven processes as well as mechanistic processes - but the support thus provided is integrated naturally into the work of the organization as a whole.

The only approach currently on offer to meet these needs is Human Interaction Management, aka HIM.[1] A recent report by Information Age, Riding the fourth wave[2], heralded the emergence of HIM as follows:

> *A new generation of people-centric collaborative information management tools is set to produce the first fundamental advances in personal productivity since the arrival of the spreadsheet.*

Gartner are quoted as predicting that the market for HIM systems is "at least another 5 years away". So, the question is this. Are you going to wait, and try to catch up with the market in a few years? Or would you prefer it that the market struggles to catch up with you?

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[1] http://human-interaction-management.info

[2] http://www.information-age.com/report/2007/eit_2007/riding_the_fourth_wave