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Pipeline's Q & A with the TMF's Keith Willets
by Tim Young

In considering the issue of Standards, Pipeline took a moment to speak with Keith Willetts, Founder and Chairman of the TeleManagement Forum, industry consultant, and general expert on the space. Here's what he had to say:

Q: Thanks for taking the opportunity to speak with us, Keith. TMF is obviously a leader in the area of standards. Why are standards so important to telecommunications?

A: Well, if you go right down to a basic level, mankind would never have built the most complicated machine on the planet, the global phone system, without some basic ability to plug it all together. Standards have been important in telecom since Alexander Graham Bell, really. We engage in network standards. We're more of an IT organization, looking at how the the business processes and systems that sit behind the networks and services actually get built, delivered, billed, and so on. Historically, there hasn't been much of a desire for standards. Every operator built it their way and that was just fine. In the last decade or so, the cost of building all of that custom software and trying to change it rapidly has just started to kill service providers. Particularly, every dollar spent on software means another five dollars integrating it. This so-called 'integration tax' has become a huge issue. It takes so long to integrate systems together and costs so much that there has been a rising desire for software that you can plug together. The desire for standardization has really grown out of a need to reduce cost. A need to reduce complexity. A need to move much faster to change the way the operational processes behind the scenes hang together. We're seeing that not just across the telecom industry, but across the software industry. If you look at the website for Oracle, or even Microsoft these days, they're talking more about software standards more and more. There's a new reason coming over the hill, as well, and that is this whole convergence issue. No longer does a service provider do their own thing and put a service together and out

it goes. Those services are comprised of other partners in the value chain. How do you get all of those partners to line up and provide a product that works? So there are more reasons driving it, and we provide standards for operating systems.

Q: Is the fact that standards haven't been adopted sooner the product of general malaise and a low priority for standardization, or has there been active resistance from companies that have proprietary software they want to maintain?

A: There are a lot of issues in that. We do standards at different levels. We do something we call frameworks, which are a guidance for how telecom operators should be putting their systems together. The first things that starts with are not software standards at all, but rather what are the business processes that are going to be automated with this software. Can we agree on some basic fundamentals for how you run a telecom service? This is not something you can performance test to, but the guidance is pretty comprehensive in the way it lays out the landscape. We've got the same thing in the area of data standardization, and of how you would go about ensuring that all the things you want to exchange information on are portrayed in a common way. Then you get right down to specifics, the equivalent to the USB port on the PC. The specific 'It either works or it doesn't work' software standards. We have a program called Prosspero, which is out plug and play standard. When you get down to the specific plug and play sockets, along comes a new bit of technology like IMS or SDP and all of a sudden people identify a need for a specific plug-in socket, and then you have to move quickly. In the past, that's been a lengthy process. A bunch of guys identify a need and work together, and exchange emails, and sit in smoke-filled rooms and write on flip charts. That method takes a long time, even if you use lots of collaboration tools and web techniques to speed that up. What we're moving to now is more of a software contribution approach. If anyone out there has met this problem before, did you develop software that helped you overcome it? Does it conform to our requirements? Does it have some test tools with it? We can fast-track that into Prosspero as a contribution from one or more members. From need to code in one step, as opposed to going from need to some paper and some software development and so forth.

Q: And as for resistance?

A: There's not active resistance. There's a history of operators doing their own thing, so they're getting the idea of buying standard, off-the-shelf commercial systems with open standards on them. Most suppliers support that. Those suppliers who own a pretty big market share of something and don't particularly want to open that up and let competitors in may be reluctant, and that's a balancing act between the forces that want to pull the standards and the forces that want to push the standards and the forces that might want to delay a standard, as they try to get that lined up commercially. Groups like the T8 Group are trying to pull some of these standards into reality. Another group of suppliers is trying to push these standards into reality. Most people adopt standards because that's the way the industry is moving. The image comes to mind of herds of Wildebeest. The herd gets moving in one direction, and the guys in the middle don't even know where they are going, but they know that they should be moving in the same direction as the rest of the group. Trying to get the group moving in that direction is probably more important than the technology of the standard itself.

Q: You touched a bit on the T8 release. Would you like to go into more detail on that?

A: Sure. If you go back ten years and you talk to AT&T, and they told you how they handled different services and such, you'd get a different answer than if you talked to BT or Telecom Italia, and so forth. Most telecom operators are littered with historic lumps of software strung together in peculiar ways. The telecom industry, being immensely profitable for decades, didn't worry about these inefficiencies. Only since the advent of brutal competition have the operators begun to consider standardizing. The tail that hangs out of the back of that is that there is a whole lot of legacy software out there, and it takes time to change it out. When operators have gone out and bought software, they've told the supplier "I'll buy your system, provided you modify it to fit with what I've already got", so you perpetuate that sort of proprietary, custom world. The pressure on operators have so much pressure on them now, they don't want to perpetuate that into the new generation networks and new converged services they are building. We've put together senior executives and CIOs from the largest SPs in the world. They have a chance to speak with one voice. Often, these groups speak to the need for standards, but their policies on the ground aren't always consistent with that. This allows them to tell the industry what is important to them and the priority you put on what gets worked on first, second, and third. This is a new project within the last few months, and we've only had a few ad hoc meetings. The first summit meeting with be in May in Nice at the TMW show. We're inviting into that group some non-traditional telecoms, and are including some media companies and cable companies in an attempt to look across the value chain and address these issues. That could turn into a pretty important group in terms of what people want to see and when they want to see it.

Q: This is a little more nebulous, but where is this all going? What is it leading to? What happens when there is interoperability across the board? What happens when the TMF has succeeded in what it has set out to do?

A: That's a great question. We've been wondering that, more or less, since we started the group. We thought the problem was actually a small one. How do you

stick a bit of premise equipment on the end of a network? As we've gotten into managed services and converged services, the problem just keeps getting bigger. It would be great to think of a time when the problems are solved and we've no more to do, but in the last two years alone, we've seen the emergence of SDPs, a whole new class of services. The connectivity services are getting easier to manage as the network gets simpler. The information, content, and applications end gets more and more complicated. It's enough to keep us busy.

Perhaps your question was aimed a bit deeper, though. How far can standards go? Is it desirable that everything looks the same? The answer to that is definitely nebulous. Take an airline. How many elements are standard, and how many elements are competitive differentiation? Quite a lot is standard. The runways and the baggage handlers and the carts on board and such are all standardized, either by real standards or by the fact that everyone buys from Beoing or Airbus. Yet, airlines still compete on many levels. So what is desirable to compete on and what isn't? There's a high desire to build everything, from cars to computers, out of reusable components that can be reconfigured. If you're going to do that, there has to be a standard. The level of standardization in the telecom space becomes much more like the standardization across service industries. There becomes a sort of cross-industry standard. There's a lot of change. It's a great question, but unfortunately it would take several hours to properly answer it [laughs].

Q: I thought you might say as much. Thank you for speaking with us.

A: It's been a pleasure.

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