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SDPs in Real Life

By Tim Young

Cast your mind back to, say, 2005 or 2006. Service Delivery Platforms were heralded by many as a game-changing advancement that would revolutionize the OSS/BSS segment and, by extension, the entire communications space.

The troubled waters that SDPs have navigated in the time since is proof that nothing is as easy as it seems. Microsoft, famously, killed its SDP efforts (dubbed the Connected Services Framework) back in December, citing its internal shift away from service delivery infrastructure and enhanced focus on services and partnerships like its Exchange Online.

Microsoft's CSF faced the problem of attempting to be too complete, to the point of being unwieldy, and other SDP efforts have had more success by remaining agile, flexible, and easily customizable. At the end of the day, after all, no two CSPs have precisely the same needs and wants, so SDPs are not one-size-fits-all.



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Identity

Because, after all, the term "SDP" is nebulous. It's loosely defined.

Jenny Huang, of AT&T Labs, has been heavily involved in the TM Forum's Service Delivery Frameworks working group, which attempts to give specific parameters for what an SDP is, or can

be.

The SDP products coming from specific vendors, Huang says, "are very self-contained, often providing only a very limited range of services and also often including their own limited and closely integrated management capability." Rather than providing a freeing platform for new and better services, this has "left the service providers with yet another set of stovepipe systems that require costly integration with their backend OSS/BSS."

Indeed, these SDPs are not conceived as yet-another silo. They're intended to be a platform for unification. Yet that ignores the complexity that pervades most CSP systems.

"Today's SDP does not provide a real competitive edge for the CSPs," said Huang. "Today's SDP does allow service providers to jump onto the bandwagon and to provide new services more quickly, however, many of the solutions are taking a green field approach, which leaves the CSP with a large amount of transformation work to do on current systems and services."

"A Different Way to Do Business"

However, in order to avoid SDPs becoming nothing more than another stove pipe in need of integration, Martin Creaner, president of TM Forum, asserts a somewhat broader definition for SDPs: "SDPs are essentially the realization of a different way a CSP wants to do business," said Creaner. "It wants to offer services and create services in a really flexible fashion. It wants to meet the needs of its customer base. It wants to move from the traditional model of service creation, which was a very painful, long term model, in which it would take, not atypically, 12-18 months to roll out a new service. From that, to a model in which they can roll out a new service in hours, days, or weeks, depending on the complexity of the service."

Well, that takes care of the SDPs as a stove pipe.

"SDPs aren't a product you can buy that instantly makes your business more efficient," said Creaner. "It's the end stage of a whole process of changing how you want to do business, and how you want to interact with other players in the value chain and how you want to react to your customers' needs."

Third Parties

Huang reminds us that services are the reason, in essence, that Next Generation Networks are valuable. "The main business drivers behind Next Generation Networks and Next Generation Service," she said, "is that while the convergence of transport technologies towards a common IP-based approach will bring many cost saving advantages, the bigger value of Next Generation Networks will be delivered through the very rapid and flexible delivery of Next Generation Services."

The real value of SDPs, as defined by this approach, may lie in the ability of CSPs to work with third party providers to create services that end consumers actually want.

"Through the use of SDPs, CSPs can expose some of their core services for use by third parties," said Creaner. "Not only a flexibility to create their own services more rapidly, but also to enable third parties to offer services to the customers using some portion of the CSPs' core capability, such as their billing capability, their authentication, their location information, and so on."

We've learned this from the worlds of devices and social networking sites, among other places. When did Facebook become more than just a MySpace clone? When third-party apps started appearing and drawing in new users. And has anyone seen that the entire Apple iPhone ad campaign of late is completely dedicated to the apps offered on the device? It's the third parties that embrace the innovation that can, in turn, increase the value of the core product.



And in this area, SDPs like BT's Ribbit have made great strides, by residing in the cloud, enabling innovation. Alan Quayle has some interesting thoughts on the virtualization of SDPs, which he makes known on his blog, alanquayle.com/blog. Essentially, Quayle takes a look at various SDPs out in the cloud, and how each is monetizing itself by charging for communication APIs, seats, hosting infrastructure, etc.

This approach by the CSPs, of establishing platforms for interaction with third party app providers, hits on several notes: it demonstrates an embrace of Web 2.0 that's arguably long overdue. It widens the body of innovation to include the meekest of innovators (who may possess the best ideas). It embraces a changing revenue model for communications companies. In short, it embraces a future that may be inevitable.

Transition

So, the heady days of the big, cumbersome, stove pipe SDPs may be fading. That's not keeping numerous vendors from playing in the space. HP, IBM, Oracle, and Jamcracker, as well as many others, continue in the SDP space, even as Microsoft and others have faded. However, I'm sure that all of these companies, as well as the CSPs that purchase their wares, would be able to embrace a model that's lighter and more agile. A truly open, truly standards-based approach may not be reasonable for some vendors, as the largest players stand to lose in such a proposition. However, our current economic situation is a reminder that when times get lean, the more flexible model wins.

And, ultimately, the global economy peppers every thought about projects like SDPs. If SDPs can be the agile, cloud-based entities they're capable of being, this may be their era. "The soft economy," says Huang, "imposes more requirements to 'do more with less.' Shortening time to market, increasing business agility, and leveraging crowd sourcing seems more important than ever."