Progress in other fields

There are some big things happening in technology - something we've been talking about for two years but it's finally reaching critical mass. It's a new term, but it's just a fancy wrapper around the XML data exchange methods we've been advocating for Project Extranet services.

The new term is Web Services. It is a major part of Microsoft's new .NET strategy and is being incorporated into their latest products - including OfficeXP and their programming tools used by software developers. Microsoft competitors (including SUN and IBM) had already been providing the tools to create web services, and are acting to coordinate their efforts to tighten the standards.

That means that any information hosted for you by a third party - having been made available through XML and Web Services - can be downloaded to your spreadsheet or database for analysis and archiving. It also means that, with some work, that information can be transferred from one web service provider to another.

Some national services are providing business information via web services. Fed-Ex shipping rates vary based upon complicated formulas including size, weight and originating and destination locations. They have made this information available to your applications through web services. That means that instead of looking up the shipping price using complicated formulas and lookup tables each time (after making sure the reference materials are up to date), the actual shipping cost can be included in your web page or spreadsheet - picked up through the Internet in real time through web services.

More to the point for the AEC industry, web based service providers similar to Project Extranet providers are adopting XML and Web Services to make their customer's data directly accessible to their customers.

Salesforce.com provides a web-based service for sales teams which is somewhat similar to Project Extranets, although it's vertical market is quite different. Their service gathers and tracks customer information from salespeople to share with their internal teams and with upper management for analysis. Salesforce.com has added a module which allows subscribers to download all the information entered in this web application, and load them into their own databases and spreadsheets. The data can be updated daily, weekly or monthly.

This is a fabulous feature for their subscribers. It means subscribers do not need to reenter all that information into their in-house systems for analysis. In the event their service provider is bought out or goes out of business or becomes too expensive to maintain, subscribers can retain all that data entered. That data can then be integrated into in-house applications, or pulled into another web-based application.

Salesforce.com plans to leverage these capabilities in order to create an off-line version of it's software that can be periodically synchronized with the web version - so that subscribers can still use it when they're not connected to the Internet.

Of course, there are subtleties involved in setting up this kind of data exchange properly (the data structures must be similar enough to avoid losing some information), but it is

at least possible to salvage your data and use it for purposes other than those provided by your Project Extranet.

We have explored before the limitations of Project Extranets - how a service appropriate for the General Contractor is not necessarily appropriate for the design team, and how neither is quite appropriate for the property management that continues after construction is finished.

If Project Extranet providers incorporate Web Services into their products, you will be able to extend and reuse the information within them. Perhaps more importantly, the data will continue to survive if you expend a little effort to synchronize or transfer the information from Design Extranet to Construction Extranet to Property Management Extranet.

Additional advantages would the the possibility of linking these tools to other data sources. Product availability during design and construction phases, supplier delivery schedules during the construction phase, and tenant lease expirations or utility costs during Property Management could be quite valuable.

Hopefully, the developers of Project Extranets will learn from Salesforce.com the value that customers put into possession of their own data and will see the advantages of sharing information through open standards.

Some standards in Web Services are still being finalized. Currently, there is a little difference in the ways these services expose their data. Hopefully, those small differences will disappear in time. There are also few standard methods of data security during the transfer of information. Although security methods can effectively be retrofitted to Web Services, things will go more smoothly when security is a built-in feature of the service.

Where do Project Extranets fall short for your firm? - e-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com.

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