SOA remains critical to business agility and transformation

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The term service-oriented architecture (SOA) has fallen out of the everyday IT lexicon in recent years and has been replaced by the more on-trend buzzwords of cloud computing, big data, mobile-first, and the social enterprise. The reality, however, is that these new trends and technologies are just driving a need for a more sophisticated form of SOA. Taking an SOA-based approach to the fundamental underlying infrastructure assets is more crucial today than it was a decade ago.

SOA allows enterprises to bring in new technologies and applications swiftly. It means they can cater for changing customer demands and play in increasingly competitive markets, while at the same time leveraging existing legacy and mainframe infrastructure. This is done primarily by middleware SOA, and more specifically, an enterprise services bus (ESB).

For example, a bank's loan processing function - the entire fulfilment cycle may touch dozens of different applications, some legacy, and some new. The ESB unifies all of these into a single environment that the CIO can manage, optimise and evolve.

The ESB sits at the heart of the architecture in any organisation that relies on legacy assets, but also needs to integrate new systems. In fact, far from being swept aside by newer concepts like Cloud Computing, according to market research firm ResearchMoz, the SOA market is expected to balloon to become a $16.4 billion industry by 2020.

New demands

ResearchMoz further says that SOA is fundamental in enabling an organisation to extend services to mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. New demands are putting pressure on the front end, as mobile applications (apps) become the de facto delivery channel for almost any consumer or transactional service imaginable.

Being able to expose services directly to consumers in a self-service context - like self-check-ins at airports and mobile banking - becomes the 'holy grail' that is generally only achievable by a concerted focus on SOA.

However, there are a host of other benefits to investing in an SOA strategy - most notably:

- Reduced integration complexity, costs, and timelines;
- Greater agility - in terms of shifting to new strategies, rolling out new services to customers, etc.;
- High availability and scalability of core applications;

- Benefitting from the latest technologies available;
- Single view of the customer and higher data quality, and
- Better collaboration between departments as key information assets become easily shared and consumed by different areas of the organisation.

Therefore, the stakes are high. It becomes important to start the SOA journey with a portfolio optimisation exercise - to arrive at a thorough understanding of the existing legacy infrastructure and a clear vision of what new infrastructure the organisation aspires to in the short, medium, and long term.

SOA should not be seen as another cost centre, which is often the perception. In fact, what it actually does is optimise the investments you've already made, allows you to move with more agility and respond to market changes, and to integrate with other systems outside the organisation better.

A good example of this would be the bank that effectively uses SOA to integrate with courier companies - automating the process between customers who request bank cards, and the delivery of those cards to the right place, and at the right time.

The dangerous result of seeing SOA simply as an IT cost is that organisations become tempted into buying 'off the shelf' software that does not achieve the desired results. The basic fundamental of SOA is that it is innate to your organisation, so development needs to be tailored. Technology names and the terms may be shifting in different directions, however, as the world of business changes, SOA is more important today than ever before and can provide an organisation with a wealth of benefits, including the competitive edge required in today's business arena.

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