

enterprise integrity



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B2B Success Secrets, Part VIII

Over the last eight months, we've discussed several opportunities for improving on business-to-business (B2B) success. This article summarizes the earlier columns, which you may want to review for a more thorough understanding of the key concepts.

The following recommendation can help your organization achieve B2B success:

- Understand your business relationships and their implementation, objectives, and status
- Establish the role of the chief relationship officer
- Implement or use a business transaction manager as a virtual B2B exchange
- Don't equate B2B and B2Bi — business is more important than technology
- Treat the business entities, relationships, processes, and activities of B2B as components of a designed, distributed system
- Design business continuity (resilience) into the B2B system
- Identify and design out potential failure modes
- Eliminate potential single points of failure
- Nurture the symbiotic nature of your B2B community (relationships of interest)
- Treat the B2B relationship as a sustainable entity, independent of the participants
- Publish the relationship rules of behavior and participant performance so participants can opt in and optimize
- Strive to make the B2B process appear seamless from each participant's process perspective.

To this list, we add one last B2B success recommendation:

- Use augmented Web service technology to implement and deliver component-type business activities that are part of the B2B process.

Every B2B relationship requires that the participants:

- Share data
- Share processes
- Collaborate on activities.

We often implement only partial B2B relationships. Traditionally, data and document exchange have been the focus — to the exclusion of process. EDI and XML have been great B2B facilitators of this exchange. However, each event is discrete.

Similarly, early B2B process integration efforts have focused on point-to-point exchanges, implementing a conversation between two businesses. The usual approach is to implement a coercive process definition, either as a common process definition or the definition as understood by one of the partners. RosettaNet Partner Interface Processes (PIPs) are good examples of this kind of process integration.

True process integration goes further, providing:


- Process independence, where each participant sees the process as if it were implemented their way
- Process autonomy, where each participant has complete control over their part of the process
- Support for many B2B participants.

This requires a bit of investment and the proper tools. It also requires the ability to collaborate in the execution of process activities (a.k.a. process steps).

Web services appear to be a great way to implement and deploy collaborative process activities, especially for B2B. Universal Description, Discovery, and Integration (UDDI) is designed to provide Web service registry and query as well as a kind of resource independence. The service consumer need not know in advance who will provide a required service or its address. However, there are several problems with using Web services for this purpose:

- UDDI is complex and few tools are available to make registration developer-friendly or user-friendly.
- Web services communication, albeit stateless, still uses a synchronous, request/reply transport (vs. asynchronous, guaranteed once, recoverable delivery).
- Essential features — such as non-repudiation, distributed transaction management, and content-based security — are missing.

Web services could be used in B2B, but they're best used for other than strategic activities. Consider, for example, a potential supplier that needs to be qualified. There's every reason to make the qualification process (and the entire set of rules of engagement) Web service-accessible. Furthermore, you could provide those same suppliers with secure, personalized performance analysis from the consumer's perspective so that both supplier and consumer can strive for an optimally beneficial relationship via a Web service.

Until Web services mature, augment them with the features discussed earlier before using them to deploy activities in real B2B processes. These features are exactly the ones provided by a business transaction manager. There are also other methods to consider. At least one company (KnowNow) has developed an interesting router infrastructure for Web services that adds many essential features currently missing from vanilla Web services. With such augmented Web services, you'll have a chance to maintain the enterprise integrity of your B2B efforts. 

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