

Application Integration for E-Business

The need for application integration in the e-commerce marketplace is growing exponentially. Corporations realize now more than ever, that to stay competitive they need to expand their business model to include an e-commerce strategy. In order to be successful in those strategies, it is necessary that companies integrate their e-commerce hubs with enterprise applications. Integration allows for the streamlining of applications, which is crucial to the company and the end user. Whether the Web site is B2B or B2C focused, application integration is the key to online success. Integration of applications allows companies to provide valuable information to their visitors, such as real time inventory, shipping information and order status. And as important as that information is to visitors, the streamlining effects to the companies are even more impressive. For example, if a company's applications are not integrated they may still have to rely on faxing orders and manual entry, which are unreliable, extremely time consuming and expensive. But with application integration, once the visitor to the site decides to purchase and hits the "accept" or "buy" button, the supply chain is activated: a sales order is created, an order acknowledgement is sent, inventory is adjusted, accounts payable sends an invoice, account receivable is notified of a pending payment, shipping is activated and a purchase order, if necessary, is created.

With that, we now all know that the streamlining of processes or application integration is what is going to be needed to compete and win in the e-commerce arena. But is it better to have a custom-coded integration or solution-based Enterprise Application Integration (EAI)?

For a while now, custom-coded integration was thought to be the only way to ensure your unique needs would be met. How else could you integrate your legacy applications with your "store bought" solutions? While yes, this is a benefit to custom-coded solutions, there are now adapters that will integrate those disparate systems without the need of custom-coding! Custom-coding requires your developers (if you are lucky enough to have some on staff with an application background) or consultants to spend countless hours matching tables, analyzing the relationships of those tables to each other, identifying sequences, and translating functional requirements into code. Worst of all, this labor-intensive work is for naught if, in the testing

stage, glitches are found or the initial requirements change, because then the developers are right back where they started.

Hence, the advent of adapters...

There are various adapters available and they range from simple, low level pieces of integration software with little functionality and scalability to very robust, and sometimes expensive, integration software packages that run the gamut and require little to no custom coding. Regardless of the functionality or price tag, it is important to note that most, but not all, adapters focus on one portion of an overall ERP system or one portion of an application. For example, some adapters may deal with the entire Oracle financial application while others may only integrate the general ledger portion of the finance application.

Another portion of the integration process that is often overlooked by some adapter technology is the most critical portion-data validation. What benefit is it to streamline or integrate your ERP system if the data you receive is corrupt or can corrupt your underlying databases?

Most high-level adapters or "smart adapters" provide robust functionality and focus on validating data before it is integrated to applications without the need for custom coding. Without using smart adapters, custom coding and interface development is necessary to integrate applications, which again, drives up costs and risks and is extremely time consuming. Through the use of smart adapters, the design and development stage is practically eliminated and a change in requirements or testing issues can be easily rectified by a couple of clicks on the keyboard.

In short, the benefits of implementing smart adapters eliminates the risk in conversion and interface projects, decreases the time to market, increases ROI for eBusiness projects and maximizes the utilization of overworked and understaffed development departments - which equals an application integration solution that meets your needs.