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ATKINS



“What’s the
Da Vinci Code that
will unlock ROI in IT?”

The Holy Grail of Competitive Advantage

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In the search for the Holy Grail of competitive advantage, too often, technology ends up dictating how we work. The servant becomes the master and investment is wasted making technology do what we really need. Give a technophile a hammer, and every problem becomes a nail: business users rightly treat them with suspicion. So what's the Da Vinci Code that will unlock ROI in IT? If the dot.com boom and bust has proved one thing (other than that a global marketplace favours the buyer!) it is that business basics matter more than cutting edge technology. Or to put it another way, it's how you use IT that matters.

This feature looks at some ground-breaking work from the Management Consultants Geospatial and groups in Atkins that leverage commodity technology to implement innovation in business process automation.

Let's consider three powerful technologies:

- Map-based information systems (GIS)
- Workflow automation
- Business Intelligence (BI) tools

There was a time when GIS was argued to be a class on its own, but commoditisation by Microsoft, Yahoo and Google, and the prevalence of map-based vehicle navigation systems and mobile maps, have seen mapping become an expectation, integrated with other functions. Mapping is a mainstream element of asset and network management, retail, market analysis and a host of other business applications. Microsoft and Oracle have entered the market aggressively,

both making maps a standard part of their enterprise architecture. Asset management system vendor EXOR has already ported its entire application onto the Oracle platform, bringing the world of Oracle mapping and business intelligence to its users.

Workflow automation has similarly downsized from heavy duty enterprise solutions like TIBCO, new entrants forcing down the cost and simplifying implementation. Workflow is used to automate the people sequences of business activities, dealing with such things as notification, queuing, approval and reducing complex tasks to simpler steps, de-skilling and even off-shoring previously expert processes.

Workflow enables complex operations between separate parties across the Internet and underpins many familiar forms-based processes. It has seen much use in legal case processing, insurance and web purchasing, but is equally pertinent to any real-time supply chain. The full significance of workflow automation is that technology becomes an innate part of the business process. For each workflow operation there may be several IT processes that must be brought together, sometimes involving legacy systems. Separate middleware providers such as IONA have also developed solutions that enable older technologies to be rejuvenated, participating in Internet-based processes, realising a fully automated workflow, giving a better return on investment. BI tools have been around for a while and vendors have charged substantial enterprise licences whilst ensuring that significant consulting

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is needed for configuration or change. A special form of BI supports the use of hierarchical balanced scorecards. This is where a number of separate key performance indicators (KPI) are weighted and combined, providing an overall balanced view of performance. At the top level, a view of total performance is provided, but such solutions also allow drill-down, pinpointing where KPI are not being met. Microsoft PerformancePoint and Spacetime Research's offerings are new entrants, designed to bring lower-cost

BI to the mainstream market, and Spacetime's solution is also map enabled.

Each of these technologies is powerful, but each is also lacking on its own.

Consider the needs of network asset management within the water industry. Atkins' vision is to provide planning applicants with an intelligent web form with which to enter their requirements and supporting documentation. The workflow solution routes the



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application to the right person depending on the nature of the work, UK or offshore. The assets themselves are real-world objects: location, means of access, where problems are occurring and impact assessment are map-driven. Where geospatial intelligence forms part of the workflow, it should be selected and presented as an innate part of the process. BI is important also, for understanding and managing performance, pinpointing and if possible, anticipating where performance has fallen short or is exceeded using a balanced scorecard to consolidate different targets into a single management view. In our example, we need to know how well our business process is performing and where the inefficiencies are. As Guy Liddell, one of our senior management consultants says, “The water industry is driven by people processes, from the end customer through to the engineer. Workflow automation holds the key to meeting performance targets and improving levels of service. That’s why we’re investing in it.”

Let’s look at the following scenario. Each water company needs to know

if their assets are under private land, public highway, or other, because of the risks and hence costs of managing replacement, affecting future valuation. Workflow processes can be combined with GIS to prioritise routine inspection and maintenance, and response times to incidents. A balanced scorecard will demonstrate, at any time, whether the future scheduling of work is going to meet targets, and if not, why not. This information then links into other high priorities, such as climate change – how will the risk profile change over the next 20 years? How do results change if carbon emissions are given a higher weighting?

It is clear that the power of each of these technologies is best realised by using them together as part of an overall business process. This is more than systems integration. Convergence is about changing the expectations of the market, developing new intellectual property, changing how we approach old problems with new solutions built on top of existing investment. Workflow automation with its underlying web technology delivers collaborative working across

previously isolated information systems, drives efficiency and takes ownership of technology away from experts.

So if you believe author Dan Brown, the long hunt for the Holy Grail is flawed by looking for the wrong thing. Understand your business, innovate in process, support it with IT and the Return on Investment will follow.

As the largest multi-disciplinary consultancy in Europe, and a top UK Management Consultancy, we are uniquely positioned to help you unlock your competitive advantage through business process innovation and the application of IT.

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