

Oracle Reaches Out to Apps Partners

April 22 2007

The company's new Application Integration Architecture is helping to bring in partners in its applications business—a cultural shift for Oracle.

Oracle is forging a new path with partners in its applications business - a real cultural shift for the company - and it's a direct result of two initiatives: Oracle's acquisition strategy that's brought in dozens, if not hundreds, of new applications to its portfolio; and a new Application Integration Architecture that helps partners better connect their customer's applications, beyond point-to-point integrations.

The Application Integration Architecture , or AIA, came out of a group quietly formed almost a year ago to centralize Oracle's efforts around service-enabling its many applications, with an eventual synthesis of functionality in Fusion Applications , Oracle's next-generation suite due in 2008.

The goal of the group initially was to find a way to create common definitions around what Siebel calls an order, or what SAP calls an order, according to Jose Lazares, vice president of Oracle's Adaptive Business Solutions group.

"We really wanted to create an architectural platform based on common objects and focus on the top 100 or 300 business objects that thrive between business apps," said Lazares, in Redwood Shores, Calif.

Somewhere along the way the group started looking at innovation for its own sake, eventually developing the AIA platform as a stand-alone

offering, though the common object model will be used to build Fusion Applications, according to Lazares.

According to Nucleus Research, the AIA platform consists of pre-built, industry-specific SOA (service-oriented architecture) services, models, processes and definitions. "Developers use these components to build SOA-based integration applications services in a top-down manner," wrote a Nucleus analyst in a research note released April 19.

"Industry-specific common objects - SOA services designed with minimal footprint for maximum customization - such as services for "ship order" are retrieved from a registry so that they can be customized for integration.

These services are then combined with industry-specific models and objects so that they can be customized for the specific business process being integrated."

The idea, according to Nucleus, is that developers can then use the enterprise business services along with BPEL (Business Process Execution Language) to further refine the application so that it can "speak to" the various provisioning and billing systems within operating environments.

While the architecture will be helpful for customers overwhelmed with integrating functionality from different Oracle applications, it could be even more useful for partners who will be able to now integrate to a common business object model, rather than building endless point integrations.

"[AIA] is essentially creating a third-partner track," said Lazares. "It actually is interacting and interfacing directly to Oracle's application integration development team."

The AIA platform will allow partners to integrate their customer's applications utilizing reusable objects and a SOA framework, sanctioned with a new Oracle certification. At the same time, Oracle will offer Integration Packages that will integrate functionality based on pre-defined processes - with any functionality from partner software outlined in solution maps.

The certification and solutions maps are the result of two new initiatives Oracle announced at its OAUG user group conference in Las Vegas April 15-19. An expanded Partner Network Applications Integration Initiative program, started 14 months ago, builds on the Fusion Middleware or point-to-point integration certifications from Oracle to include those integrations done by partners using AIA.

Oracle also announced 11 new ISV solution maps to depict industry and horizontal business processes that are available from Oracle and its ISV partners - connections that in the past were not readily visible.

Oracle will develop vertically oriented solution maps for health care (provider and payer), retail, life sciences, insurance, public sector and professional services. Horizontal maps will address corporate performance management, CRM (customer relationship management), financial management, procurement, and project and grants management.

While the new AIA platform could very well wind up overshadowing Fusion Applications - the impetus for the Adaptive Business Solutions group - Oracle's new partner initiatives could have a second, unintended effect: salving partner issues on the apps front.

"We've been a longtime partner on the platform side. We're one of the top five ISVs with Fusion Middleware components. But what we've always struggled with is - Oracle - has always acted as two separate

companies: platform and applications. On the apps side that was like one company; they were very disconnected - in terms of - the way they go about looking at - partners - strategically," said Chris Wong, executive vice president and chief products officer at Agile Software, in San Jose, Calif. "More than anything - Oracle - wants to change that, to put more value on partners."

Oracle is also working toward the eventual goal of having partners build third-party, or composite, applications using the AIA platform.

"It's a natural extension," said Tom Herrmann, vice president of ISV management and programs at Oracle. "In some cases it's been like pulling teeth - to get partners to develop applications - . They've had to do it because customers wanted them to. - AIA - will incent them in some cases to build more around the Oracle ecosystem."

Herrmann said that with all the acquisitions Oracle has made over the past couple of years - 32 in 34 months - it has been "difficult for partners to keep up." By building to a common model adding one more product on the back end, either Fusion Applications or another acquisition, partners won't have to worry about integrations.

But building composite applications is more of a "phase two" project that is between 12 and 18 months out, according to Herrmann. He will start first with the "low-hanging fruit" of getting partners to leverage the AIA technology, then work toward building an ecosystem around composite applications.

But to be successful in building a partner ecosystem, Oracle's Lazares said there are three things the company needs to do.

"We needed to have a more direct development involvement. Partners would say, 'We want to interface to the current API, - but it - isn't

supported, how do I expose those services?' By having development involved we can influence those decisions more directly and engage ISVs."

Secondly, Oracle needed to take more of an industry and process-centric view of the market to create a better go-to-market approach with partners, something that it's working on now through the industry solution maps and other initiatives. Lastly, Oracle needs to work through the nature of its relationships with partners, where it deems there is value in having both Oracle and third-party applications in a single environment, according to Lazares. "That's really going to be where the rubber meets the road," he said. "The fruit will be on how well we deliver over the next year with partners."

For Agile Software, a PLM (product lifecycle management) company that, as a function of what its software does, really needs to integrate with systems of record from the likes of Oracle, SAP and Infor. The fact that Oracle is looking to be more partner-centric in its applications division is an indication that Oracle is coming to understand the value of other software companies in the Oracle world, according to Agile's Wong.

"There is more a willingness to talk in terms of how a third-party application would add value in an Oracle solution set," said Wong. "With the potential of the Process Integration Packs and industry reference maps Oracle is talking about, I am encouraged to go forward with that."

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