

IT Analysis – The Death of Workplace

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Some time back (well, a couple of years, actually), I wrote an article on IBM Lotus' product, Workplace, a communication and collaboration environment written as a set of services accessed via a version of IBM WebSphere Portal shipped with the product. I really liked this solution—but felt that I had to write something to try and sort out some of the messaging confusion that seemed to be present from IBM.

The main confusion seemed to be around what Workplace actually was—Quocirca research at the time showed that Workplace was tying with WebSphere Portal as portal of choice for the future. The problem was, Workplace wasn't a portal in itself—it just used WebSphere Portal as a front end.

The next confusion was whether Workplace was the replacement for Notes/Domino—and IBM really did itself no favours here. Users, partners, press, analysts and IBMers alike all seemed to see Workplace as the speedy death of Notes/Domino—and many users went into strategic review mode. Even with the following year's message that Workplace was a completely parallel development stream that enabled co-existence of Notes/Domino and Workplace, the confusion still reigned, and the perception was that Notes and Domino would be dead products within a few short years.

So, at this Lotusphere (IBM's annual bunfight for users in Orlando, Florida), the Workplace name just wasn't present. After 2 years of heavy pushing, the name has been retired. Workplace is dead. Bad news all round for those like me who thought it was great, and certainly for those who had decided to go down the Workplace route.

Except, of course, Workplace isn't dead. IBM has showed that it has listened (even if it has taken some time), and has brought back WebSphere Portal as the one and only name for its portal offering. Notes/Domino 8 ("Hannover") shows a lot of the work that was carried out within Workplace—light document editors, e-forms, basic workflow and so on—all of which are

callable as services from wherever you need them. New products in the portfolio show the benefits of having a common code approach, and show how callable services can be used through multiple front ends depending on need.

The overall Lotus offering has grown massively over the last couple of years—IBM has decided to invest in Lotus, rather than seeing it as a cash cow. By putting Portal into Lotus' hands, the strengths of Lotus as the owner of the interface between man and machine is brought to the fore. By integrating Lotus into the rest of the IBM software group means that the strengths of back end integration and connectivity is also there. From the group that worked on Workplace, we have functionality that would not have grown out of the old Lotus Notes/Domino team organically—the Workplace team was allowed to work without the need to reference existing technology designs. This has also led to new capabilities from Lotus—products in the social networking space such as Quicr and Connections, enabling Wikis, Blogs, mobile usage and more.

So, it looks like Lotus may be pulling ahead of Microsoft again in the technology stakes. However, in many areas, it will still remain an uphill struggle for Lotus. In the SMB market, for example, sales of Windows Small Business Server (SBS) 2003 mean that organisations already get email and portal products with Exchange and SharePoint. In this market, where Microsoft is a big player, IBM Lotus will still struggle to make inroads.

In the mid-market, IBM still has perceptual issues. IBM is seen as the Big Blue that comes in at high cost and with conservative products that cling more to the old than drive the new. Microsoft is seen as the Little Blue with all the energy and innovation. Fighting this perception is no easy task—the users, the corporate management and the channel all need to be persuaded that IBM Lotus can take this market seriously and can provide cost effective solutions that meet the perceived need of the markets.

Large organisations are IBM's heartland, and it is here where the big Notes/Domino sites are, and where WebSphere Portal plays best with its heterogeneous back and front end support capabilities. The IBM use case scenarios and case studies are from the big guys—even where small companies are used as examples (e.g. the Film Foundation), these people are interfacing to large numbers of other players in the markets.

There is a new version of WebSphere Portal aimed at the mid-market—WebSphere Portal Express, with a claimed set up time of 45 minutes, and a wealth of included templates to get companies up and running. The need here is for IBM to ship this on xSeries and iSeries servers ready configured, so that the channel can see this as a quick and easy customer offer, being able to compete directly against Windows SBS 2003. There is also a strong need for IBM to further focus its channel on the opportunities that are there—those within the mid-market and even into the SMB environment who have a strong need for a fully integrated communication and collaboration environment who are currently one or two revisions behind the current Microsoft products.

With Microsoft getting ready to push new full versions of Exchange, SharePoint and Live Communications Server during 2007, IBM Lotus will need to make the most of this small window of marketing opportunity.

With the impact of social networking increasing, organisations needing to find ways of mapping and managing usage of newer collaboration technologies, and the omni-present danger of being out of governance, IBM Lotus' new portfolio bears strong inspection. That IBM looks like finally managing to rationalise its product portfolio, simplify its messaging, and provide a base set of solutions that are both easy to deploy and flexible in use is good news.

Getting rounds of applause from 7,500 loyal Lotus Eaters for such announcements as being able to drag and drop a document from one place to another, or in being able to email a link to a shared document rather than the document itself is one thing. Persuading the buying public who perceive Lotus as "that Notes company" to look at IBM Lotus in a new light is another. That many in the buying community will either not hear the message at all, or will not be open to truly hearing the underlying information is where IBM's weakness still lies.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

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