

Straight Talking – SOA – Huh?

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Service-oriented architectures (SOAs) are the subject de jour with IT vendors, who have been using the term as if the concept has been totally understood by the buying audience and is well along the way to general implementation.

However, research carried out by Quocirca on behalf of Oracle earlier this year shows a rather different picture. From a sample size of 1,500 respondents representing a mixture of technical and business people, more than 30 per cent said they have absolutely no knowledge of what SOA or service-oriented architecture means. More than 25 per cent more said they have minimal knowledge of it and only 20 per cent stated they have a fair understanding or a good working knowledge of what SOA is all about.

This split is even more pronounced when we just look at the business respondents - 55 per cent said they have absolutely no idea what SOA is about and only 10 per cent said they have sufficient knowledge to understand what impact SOA would have on their business.

This presents a problem. SOA is an evolutionary approach that does not require a rip-and-replace of infrastructure and applications but does generally require buy-in from the business to gain the major benefits, such as functional component reuse, efficient use of assets and business flexibility through the rapid provisioning of composite applications to meet changes in business processes.

If the business doesn't 'get' SOA, and the technical community has only a little more understanding, just how successful can SOA be in the short to medium term?

Again the Quocirca research shows that less than 10 per cent of respondents' organisations already have an SOA, with 17 per cent having no plans at all to look at one. Nearly 30 per cent see the move as being too difficult based on their existing infrastructure.

Direct discussions with end users seem to support the research too. Many people we speak

to say they cannot afford the business impact of moving from an existing architecture to an SOA; they have the perception that it is a step change rather than a gradual one. Many others who have moved towards an SOA have replaced hard-coded connectivity with hard-linked SOA connectivity, minimising the capabilities for component reuse and business flexibility. The idea of creating pools of loosely coupled functionality, capable of being rapidly put together as a solution does not seem to have broken through.

So whose fault is it all? Strangely, the research shows the majority of people feel information coming through from vendors is relatively consistent and that the respondents are quite happy with the information.

But if the basic understanding of SOA is so poor, is it that this 'consistent' information is just consistently misleading? Is it down to the analyst community overselling SOA as a concept and focusing far more on the technological impact, rather than the business impact? Is it the media, looking only for the day's headline, and neglecting the actual issues?

Probably a mixture of all three. It seems a strong campaign is required from the industry as a whole to educate the markets on why SOA is 'a good thing' all round - why it's better for the vendors and better for the users.

The main message must be that businesses' existing IT investments are safe - SOA does not require an organisation to dump its SAP or Siebel installations. These enterprise applications can be included within the SOA as peers, using specific technologies to decompose the monolithic architectures to provide discrete functions as callable routines that can be utilised by any other part of the architecture.

Further, we need messages that promote how SOA gives control back to the business. Many current technical solutions require businesses to change their processes to adapt to the technology solution - or they mean any change

to a business process will require a considerable amount of time in redesigning and rolling out the technical.

An SOA can provide a far more responsive solution to business process change. The composite solution, built on discrete functional components, is no longer dependent on application specific workflows, and visual process tools can enable processes to be changed on the fly.

The good news is that even with such a low level of understanding, SOA is making some real inroads. Just under 25 per cent of respondents in the Quocirca research stated that all new functionality is being implemented as SOA, and a further 17 per cent are migrating some legacy over to SOA as well.

Provided these organisations are implementing SOA correctly, they may well be the catalyst for further change in the market. Vendors who are involved in SOA success stories need to bring these case scenarios to their customer and prospective customer bases, not as deep tomes of technical details but as examples of how organisations addressed a specific business need.

Quocirca does believe that SOA is the future. Like many technologies and technological approaches before it, however, it runs the risk of being a golden goose killed before it has a real chance. Poor quality implementations, lack of suitable granularity in functional components, a lack of adequate understanding of what an SOA offers at a business level and the Wall Street pressures on application vendors to maintain revenues through selling tightly coupled application suites could result in perceptions that SOA just doesn't do what it says on the box.

Those survey respondents who had gone fully down the SOA route saw major benefits for their organisations. These organisations are more competitive, due to the flexibility of their optimised environments. As more go down the SOA route, the question has to be: can you afford not to? At worst, you need to understand what SOA is - and what the real arguments for and against it are.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

Quocirca Services

The insight and experience that comes from working as an industry analyst as well as a practitioner allows the Quocirca team to contribute significantly to IT Vendors, Service Providers and Corporate clients. To this end, it provides a range of consulting and advisory services. Details of these, along with some of Quocirca's latest analysis, may be obtained by visiting <http://www.quocirca.com>

Quocirca's primary research involves the surveying of many thousands of technical and business end users each quarter, analyzing their perceptions of the possible impact of emerging, evolving and maturing technologies on their businesses.