



Home

Articles

Resources

Events

Bookstore

EA Library

Discussions

Founding Partners:



The State of Distributed Computing

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I got into a discussion of component systems the other day, and afterwards reflected on how the conversation had been "so 1990s." In the mid-1990s, people debated EJB and COM components. Today, the focus is on service-oriented architectures (SOAs) and the latest XML standards.

Corporate architects, unfortunately, have to live in the real world, not in the more artificial world created by analysts and journalists who like to discuss the latest technologies and unique new applications. Most practical architects are probably closer to the "1990s" world of distributed components, Java, .NET, and EJBs than they are to SOA. Let's face it; SOA is still a work in progress. Many standards are incomplete and few companies have actually fielded major applications that rely on services delivered over the Internet. We are moving toward such a world, rapidly, but most of us haven't arrived there yet.

Most companies are still working with Java and EJBs or COM, .NET, VB, and C#. In other words, most real projects are still focused on developing and fielding distributed component architectures, with the emphasis on the components and component languages rather than on services, UDDI, and various other new XML protocols. All things considered, it's probably a pretty good place to be.

SOA will arrive in due course and offer new advantages and make distribution easier to achieve. It will bring a new set of security problems, but we should be ready for most of them when we actually get there.

Meanwhile, most of us are focused on honing our component skills and building applications that perform well on EJB and .NET application servers.

I spent some time at Chordiant recently and was impressed with the company's BPM/CRM suite. The product is written in Java and all of the CRM modules are, in fact, EJB components. As a result, this product has far more flexibility than a typical ERP or CRM suite. Moreover, Chordiant is able to support a business process layer that allows managers to modify business processes on the fly, confident that the underlying software will instantly reconfigure itself to support a new process model. The BPM features in Chordiant are impressive, but ultimately, they are only a layer added on top of a set of Java components. This isn't an endorsement of Chordiant, as such. I am sure there are a lot of other applications just as well designed. The point I am making, however, is that if you get the component architecture right using "1990s" technology, you can easily adopt to SOA when the time comes. SOA may use a variety of new XML protocols, but the services being called are still components, written in either Java,

VB, or C#.

The media may not feature so many stories on components, EJB, or COM, but the reality is that that is what

most IT departments are using. I would guess that if SOA is a bit longer in arriving, that will be just fine. Companies need time to train their people in the development and use of the latest component technologies, and architects need the time to create solid distributed component systems. Full-scale SOA architectures will arrive in time. If, before they arrive, your company has migrated its important software applications to well-designed component systems and established a good component methodology that everyone feels comfortable with, you will have no trouble transitioning to SOA.

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