

Burriss' Business Case for Business Integration

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As CIO for Burriss Logistics, a logistics provider of temperature controlled foods along the East Coast, my role is to solve problems for the business, and I usually do that with technology. Problems can originate anywhere from across the business, often because of the changes in the business.

As the business infrastructure has grown in support of company growth, by both acquisitions and addition of new applications through the business, we've been faced with the challenges of how to integrate, and evolve applications. Gone are the days of rip-and-replace. So we are constantly looking for ways to bridge those applications and the interfaces from existing legacy apps to the newer applications.

Our search for application integration started with looking for a replacement and an upgrade to the way we mapped and built EDI services over the last number of years. Gone are the predictions that EDI is going to go away; in fact, it's taken on many new turns, twists and challenges. So, mapping for EDI was one of the driving forces.

But that was just one problem, and we didn't want to stop there. EDI and mapping took on many different forms, as we had many different applications to and from which to map. In the logistics business, companies have a tremendous number of partners with whom they interface in a real-time single transaction, in batch mode. Those all presented challenges for us, particularly as we have had to integrate both new applications and existing ones.

Another area of challenge is the way the organization has grown. Acquisitions are a challenge to every IT organization and it's certainly the same in our shop. As we've made these acquisitions, we've been able to get the business application to do the integration, but often the existing partners already have their own tried and true interface and/or best practice that they need to continue, or want to continue, to execute.

As suggested, one of our bigger challenges in integrating new partners and applications is not necessarily the mapping of the data, but rather the change to the business process. In the past, the partner may have acted one way, the systems another way; the culture allows and promotes operations, but in fact, we have to change that partner's method of doing business in such a way that the mapping of the data is no longer the hard part.

We've got to convince the customer that the new business process is appropriate. We have to become like the customer, get inside his/her brain; we have to get like the customer in business processes; we have to get like the customer in the data. So our challenge to find a solution to

solve these problems is more than just mapping data. It's more than just an element here for an element there. It's more than just the timing.

In fact, our two businesses have to align with one another so that we find ourselves in synchronization for a single transaction, a batch transaction, a moment in time, a week or a period of time. Those add up to be more than just a data mapping/interfaces requirement for the new solutions.

Let's return to the reasons for our search for new business integration tools and solutions.

The challenges with acquisitions center on how we integrate new business applications: to get like the customer and make use of new business processes, or at least build upon business processes that exist and learn how to interface differently to the customer. And, as important as this is, the challenge for new solutions is to assist us with a technology stack change.

We could go on for days in terms of the numbers of challenges that we have got there. We're all faced with

- Diminishing and changing skill sets,
- The expense and cost of resources,
- The time allotted to get ready for new partnerships and businesses coming on as acquisitions take place in shorter timeframes than ever before.

So while all of that is happening, the technology stack change causes us to look differently for new tools, new skill sets, and how are we going to put those together in a solution that delivers results very quickly.

I don't believe our shop at Burriss is much different from any other shop across corporate America, or literally around the world. The challenge that we have today inside of IT is to stay mean and lean, yet provide capabilities, resources and partnerships throughout the enterprise and between enterprises. However, in this era of technology stack changes, we've got to be nimble. We've got to have a vision. We've got to be looking forward.

So in reality, when the rubber meets the road, our job is to deliver solutions that interface to that legacy code in the back room where there are diminishing resources. Probably the biggest area of dealing with legacy is the challenge that we have in integrating and taking advantage of the exception handling with respect to legacy systems interfacing to new applications.

In that respect, for example, we need to provide integration from our in-house warehouse management system and ERP to Lawson financials, and an inventory forecasting and replenishment system called Clarity, from Blue Ridge. We have used Extol Business Integrator to map data to several key partner or customer accounts that use SAP in their organizations.

We need to be able to address the exception handling in an environment where we're not fully in a relational model, where steward procedures and triggers are not the operative mode or normal

mode for applications. The need to handle exceptions in a fully automated workflow environment has been a challenge for many organizations.

As we've grown up from this small organization where we've communicated in batch to our customers and partners, we've had to recognize that we need to manage by exception. We need to manage in that infamous real-time transactional environment. So if we're able to take advantage of alerts and messages that add to that workflow where we're communicating in this automated fashion without the need for a plug-and-play of valuable human resources, we've solved a lot of problems very quickly and allowed ourselves to operate the business and only monitor, watching for those exceptions in the business process.

Activity monitoring is another area for which we've had to find a solution. In fact, one of the challenges that we've faced on the backend (not necessarily between partners), is to monitor events taking place by exception or a defined scope and purpose event, where we're looking for a particular event to happen, that then triggers another event (business process) to happen; automate that between their own internal business applications.

To recap what our purpose was and what we've been looking for in a solution, we've been looking for a bridge between internal business applications. We've been looking for a bridge to span systems and business processes between our partners and ourselves. We've been looking for a multi-platform environment in which we operate. We've got all the operating systems represented within our enterprise and, again, much like most shops, all of these parts need to play together.

They need to do it in a timely fashion (basically in real-time), to make those bridges appropriate, and where necessary, to fix those bridges in place so that we're appropriate with our timing. The business processes between customers and between our applications across platforms requires a special solution. Most importantly, problems that we've had to solve in the last 10 or 15 years have really been a visionary thought for which we've found solutions over time. We didn't go out and architect this.

We didn't go out and make a quick response to something we found in the marketplace; in fact, we looked for many years. In the case of the EXTOL solution, it was probably approaching 10 years that we took to look for a business integration product that allowed us to pull together partner requirements, application requirements in-house, and to do it in such a way that was seamless. It allowed us to migrate to a new product, to a new solution.

In fact, the EXTOL solution became a pseudo-language of its own. Having a vision many years ago allowed us to look for the best solution in the marketplace and make use of it in our organization. The primary successful objective that we've attained to date is the fact that with our lean and mean IT staff, the EXTOL solution has literally empowered them to do more with less.

The next question that we must answer is *how do we continue the strategy?* Where does the vision lead next? Certainly with the EXTOL solution, we're no longer in reactive mode 24 hours a day; instead we find ourselves in a proactive mode of addressing problems. Now is the time get with key partners and customers; to ask the question, *how can we help solve your business problems*, in addition to continuing to solve those business problems back at Burriss and the enterprise?

And we need to do this simultaneously with a lean and mean staff, where skill sets continue to change and resources become more expensive on a daily basis. To this point we've been able to keep our development processes and intellectual property in-house. We've not been forced to outsource and offshore, as many companies are doing. Keeping our intellectual property in-house allows us to use the experience for those business processes and maintain the Burriss mindset that we're going to get like the customer.

It is no exaggeration to say that Extol's Business Integrator allows us to achieve our motto to "get like the customer." It's not merely a slogan, it is our measure of success: customer satisfaction. More specifically, our success factors are met when the customer –whether a trading partner or in-house user of a critical application for their part of the business-- says they are satisfied with the integrity of the data into their applications or operations.

We've been able to do all that, and we are looking forward to continuing down that road, move the strategy along, set a new vision and move forward. This is not something that can be accomplished without strong business integration technology.