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1 year subscription: **\$295***
3 months subscription: **\$95***
Single issue: **\$39**
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Published by Procullux Media Ltd,
 8 Berridge Mews, London NW6,
 UK, +44 207 443 9660

Enquiries: info@pcxvs.com

looselycoupled.com/pubs/digest

Early riders on the service bus

SPECIAL REPORT by David Longworth

ENGINEERING standards only began to take shape in the nineteenth century, when the leaders of the industrial revolution realized the railroad tracks they were building across the industrializing world had to link together to carry its produce.

Something similar should be happening today in the world of integration, commentators say, with the enterprise service bus (ESB) providing the foundations on which a whole new generation of applications and services can be built. But it isn't. Beyond the hype, actual examples of ESBs are causing barely a ripple in the integration pond, with low overall awareness and only a handful of users. Yet ESBs are due to replace traditional middleware by 2007, says the influential *Gartner Predicts 2004*.

Has Gartner got it wrong? What will provide the spark needed to kickstart a revolution which some liken to the invention of the steam engine, but right now looks more like the Wright Brothers' early flights? Or will the transition be more of an evolution than an all-out coup d'état?

The ESB concept posits a universal transport bus into which all integrations are made throughout the enterprise. The first point to note is that despite its universality there is no room for purism: multiple transport layers and protocols come into play.

"The critical thing is, how do you get from the real world to SOA?" — Ian Howells, SeeBeyond

And while vendors say the increasing ubiquity of integration will drive the adoption of ESB, users first need to untangle the existing web of legacy integrations, along with their reliance on proprietary architectures from incumbent vendors.

Commentators prefer industrial-era analogies for ESB because they see huge benefits accruing from the adoption of vendor-independent, standards-based architectures. Many see parallels between the shift to ESB and earlier moves from proprietary to relational databases, or from home-grown application servers to J2EE.

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“Customers want incremental solutions. If we say, ‘Throw that away to use this cool new standards-based thing,’ they’ll laugh at us.”

— Bob Sutor, IBM, page 2

“To get the service right [for reuse] requires changes in the funding model and organizational chart”

— James McGovern, The Hartford, page 7

“Instead of using MQ, you could choose to use SOAP over HTTP — although personally I think you’d be an idiot ...”

— Steve Craggs, Integration Consortium, page 11