Loosely Coupled

MONTHLY DIGEST

Informed analysis of trends and best practice in web services and business process management

AON takes integration to the wire

SPECIAL REPORT by Phil Wainewright

WITH THE LAUNCH of its AON product line last month, Cisco has given a substantial boost to the notion of having network devices share the workload of application integration, supplementing or replacing traditional software-only alternatives.

Application-oriented networking – the concept behind AON – isn't a new idea, even though Cisco claims its variety will prove more advanced and pervasive than current products. A number of vendors – some with track records dating back five years or more – already offer dedicated hardware devices to speed XML operations between distributed applications. Customers have successfully used their products to cut costs and boost performance in SOA environments.

But the potential contribution of network devices is largely overlooked in mainstream SOA design, and there is little best practice to draw on.

Loosely Coupled has spoken to vendors and customers to assess:

- When to introduce network devices into an application infrastructure;
- What operations such devices are best equipped to perform;
- The issues when deploying them;
- The market impact of Cisco's entry

The XML appliance sector had always seemed something of a backwater niche until network equipment vendor Cisco arrived on the scene in June.

Some customers have stopped using existing integration or middleware software altogether

Having enlisted influential partners including SAP, IBM and Tibco, Cisco has forced a re-evaluation. Existing vendors have of course welcomed Cisco's market entry as a huge validation of what they've been doing.

"The biggest network company and the biggest enterprise software company in the world are both agreeing that there is a new [layer] of hardware infrastructure needed to make this work," says Reactivity VP of marketing Joelle Gropper Kaufman, referring to Cisco's AON partnership with top application vendor SAP.

❝**[Because of tight coupling] we end up with a legacy environment with a bunch of stuff on top to keep it running – which is generally people**❞
— Fred Matteson, Fireman's Fund, *page 9*

❝**[J2EE] was a lot of overkill for a small function in the middle. We felt that scalability would kill us**❞
— Systems architect, financial services company, *page 10*

❝**[With an appliance] you just plug it in, give it an IP address, deploy the policy. It's really an application device, but we treat it like a network device**❞
— Spyros Kattou, Aeroplan, *page 13*