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Take steady, balanced approach to SOA

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Time and balance are critical factors in getting an SOA (service-oriented architecture) implementation right, according to executives at European insurance company Helvetia Patria Group.

SOA is the latest industry buzzword to describe how to create and manage IT systems through reusable software and services.

"One thing to understand is that the implementation of SOA takes time, it's a journey," Didier Beck, the head of eBusiness Center at Helvetia Patria, said in a phone interview Wednesday.

He cautioned against rushing headlong into an SOA deployment. Instead, he suggests a company spend time at the start of the project to come up with a vision followed by a road map with milestones for what it hopes to achieve both technically and in a business sense with the deployment. It's vital to ensure a balance between business and technology needs from the get-go, Beck added.

Helvetia Patria started down the path six years ago to what is now being called SOA. At that time, the company wanted to create a new Internet-based platform that it called eBusiness Center. The platform would bring together the firm's legacy, proprietary and open-source software together in a "loosely coupled integration" based around open standards, according to Beck.

The aim is never to be so reliant on a particular piece of software or an IT vendor that you can't swap it or them out of the platform if a better alternative comes along, according to Beck.

With its headquarters in Switzerland, Helvetia Patria also operates in Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and employs 4,700 staff. It sells life, property and casualty insurance and reinsurance together with private and occupational pension plans.

Goals for eBusiness Center included speeding up application development and promoting reuse of common components. Helvetia Patria also wanted to be able to develop applications that could then be used by a variety of distribution channels such as the Web and intranets instead of having to write applications separately for every channel.

Back in 2000, Helvetia Patria relied heavily on IBM for much of its hardware and software. However, the insurance company ended up choosing to work with Hewlett-Packard (HP) on the development of the new platform. "SOA was the door for HP to enter into Helvetia Patria," Beck said. "Today, we're very happy we did that. It was very important strategically to bring in a second very strong technology partner."

HP was the only company that was willing to work with Helvetia Patria according to a collaborative model the insurance firm had come up with, said Nick Stefania, the deputy head of eBusiness Center. The idea was to facilitate a skills transfer between HP and Helvetia Patria staff as they worked together on the project. More than 30 Helvetia Patria developers have been trained in that way, Beck said.

HP helped develop the architecture for eBusiness Center based on a combination of its Nimius framework of software components and BEA Systems' WebLogic Server middleware.

Helvetia Patria went live with its first application developed based on eBusiness Center in February 2002, according to Beck. Since then, the company has put in place four to six new applications per year, he said. Development times for new applications are now between four and eight months, making development two to three times faster than was previously possible.

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