

WEBALO  
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## WEBALO BRINGS SERVICE-ORIENTED ARCHITECTURE TO THE UI LEVEL

There's no shortage of vendors offering software that helps companies take advantage of Web services technologies. Now comes Webalo, with a different take on service-oriented architecture (SOA): a service that provides a consistent interface to service-oriented applications, or what the company calls the 'last mile' of SOA. An early application for the company's User Proxy Service technology is a mobile dashboard, which IBM is hosting.

### IMPACT ASSESSMENT

#### The message

After six years of development, Webalo has launched its User Proxy Service, designed to connect Web services to client devices via a consistent interface without special programming.

#### Competitive landscape

Mobile middleware providers like Aligo, Sybase's iAnywhere Solutions subsidiary, Good Technology, Vipara and Dexterra already specialize in connecting mobile devices to Web applications. AJAX-based rich Internet application (RIA) providers like JackBe, Nexaweb and Macromedia could also compete. Webalo itself is wary of any vendor that wants to play in the Web services 'mash-up' space - Web services that combine, or mash together, other Web services.

#### The 451 Assessment

It's been six years in the making, but Webalo still seems very much a work in progress to us, its technology and customers still at beta level. IBM is a good partner for any startup, but there's been precious little channel activity beyond that for the company. We like how Webalo has positioned itself to ride the Web 2.0/RIA/enterprise 'mash-up' wave, but in the short term, it looks to have a difficult time distinguishing itself from existing mobile middleware vendors.

#### Context

Webalo was founded early in 2000 by Peter Price and Seth Bruder. This is CEO Price's third startup; he previously cofounded Expertech, a European developer of expert system software, in 1984 and saw it through to its sale to Inference Communications six years later. He was a member of the management committee that organized Inference's IPO in 1995. Price then cofounded TriVida, a networked Web personalization service company, in 1997 and managed the sale of that company to BeFree in 2000. He also worked for Limbex briefly in 1996, until that company was sold to Quarterdeck later that year.

Bruder, Webalo's CTO, has a PhD in physics from Princeton University and was previously a strategy consultant with Mercer Management Consulting, specializing in the manufacturing, financial services and retail sectors. Jeff Greif, former lead developer at Inference and TriVida, has followed Price to Webalo where he is chief architect. The Santa Monica, California-based company has 12 employees with outsourced development and marketing, based in the UK and US, respectively. It has raised \$4m to date in private financing and through its own consulting work.

The company acknowledges that the market for its technology has largely been dormant for most of its existence, which is partly why it just held its official 'launch' last month, six years after it was founded. However, Webalo has seen more interest in its User Proxy Service in the past year and is considering another private or venture round to help finance growth. It expects to double its workforce this year, hiring more in-house developers, marketing and business development personnel.

### Technology

The User Proxy Service is a Web service that provides a consistent user interface across multiple Web service applications and multiple devices. Webalo will offer it as a hosted service. The proxy is an 'always-on' service, decoupled from whatever device the user accesses it from, but able to accept information on behalf of the user when the user is offline. Perhaps more importantly, the User Proxy reconciles the formatting of the application's data and the device interface protocols, to match whatever device the end user is using for the service, so that system planners and programmers won't have to worry about which end-user devices to support.

The User Proxy takes a dashboard approach to the specification of the user interface and how it should react to changing information. The typical interface to Web services today is the Web portal, but Webalo says its service is better since it handles asynchronous interactions between user and Web service and allows the Web service to initiate contact with the user, which the company says is necessary in the real-time world of Web services.

The User Proxy Service has both server and client pieces. The server is the core of the technology, with Web services interfaces for applications and user interfaces for users. It handles issues of context, user preferences and devices automatically, determining how the interaction between user and Web service is carried out. The client piece provides access to the User Proxy Service via XHTML browsers and managed clients for specific wireless devices like Research In Motion's BlackBerry, Windows Mobile devices (including Pocket PC and the latest Treos) and Java MIDP 2.0-based devices, including Treos, Symbian OS phones and other smartphones. Application-specific functionality is uploaded from the server to these devices.

### Strategy

Although the first application built with the User Proxy Service is a mobile dashboard, Webalo envisions itself as a Salesforce.com for SOA applications; in this case, handling just the user interface piece. It will offer User Proxy Service as a hosted service for other software developers, systems integrators and enterprises that wish to build ad hoc SOA business applications. The partner market is very important to the company, and Webalo expects many partners to host the User Proxy Service themselves.

IBM is an early partner and is hosting and rebranding Mobile Dashboard. Webalo hopes that leads to partnerships with IBM's business intelligence partners, almost all of which have mobile applications that the Mobile Dashboard would be a good fit for. Access to online gaming and lottery tickets via mobile devices is another potential use for Webalo's technology and an area the company expects to pursue. The company also sees applications of its technology for process assurance in retail operations. By next year, the company intends to build a Webalo Desktop and wizards for importing Web services and building composite application interfaces, both of which would be geared toward users that are less technical.

### Customers

Details about customers seem sketchy so far, with Webalo claiming just 30 beta users. Full release of the Mobile Dashboard isn't until June. C-level executives, line managers, field service forces and sales forces are expected to be the primary users of Webalo's technology. The company expects to sell to ISVs and business partners, as well as directly to enterprises in some cases. Large enterprises and small-to-medium businesses - through partners - are the company's target market.

### Competition

Webalo sees its software as playing in the 'enterprise mash-up' space. Think of the popular zillow.com site that combines Web services for mapping, aerial photos and real estate data. Webalo has identified as possible competitors Zimbra, which develops a collaboration suite that works with any end-user client, and Bungee Labs, a startup specializing in mash-ups, whose website is currently in placeholder state.

The company sees Microsoft as also moving into this space. Strikelron offers a marketplace of Web services, would could be a competitor or channel partner for Webalo. Given Webalo's early focus on mobile devices, mobile middleware providers like Aligo, Sybase's iAnywhere Solutions subsidiary, Good Technology, Vipera and Dexterra would seem to be competitive alternatives to Webalo. JackBe's NQ suite, an AJAX-based technology that separates an application's presentation layer from its back-end processes and data services, is also a potential competitor. Nexaweb Technologies and Macromedia offer similar technology.

### SWOT ANALYSIS

#### Strengths/Weaknesses

Webalo is led by some very smart people who have put a lot of time into developing the technology. The company has little overhead, as well as a good initial partner for any startup: IBM. After six years, Webalo should be further along than it is. Its products and customers are still in beta, and it has just one partner signed up to help promote its technology.

#### Opportunities/Threats

Webalo's technology sits at the confluence of rich Internet applications, Web services 'mash-ups' and extending applications to mobile devices - all opportunity-rich environments. Webalo will have to first differentiate itself from mobile middleware and AJAX RIA vendors. Competitors could also emerge that are better funded and bring products to market faster. 'Mobile dashboard' is hardly a new concept and potential customers could quickly tune Webalo out.