

Webalo puts the user back into web services

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By CBR Staff Writer

Although web services are typically associated with the automated interplay of applications exposed as services, one company wants to put the user back into the equation. Webalo Inc is unveiling a hosted service that ensures that any web services exposed directly to end users are presented consistently.

In effect, the company claims to bridge the gap between SOA (services-oriented architectures) and end users. Webalo calls its invention a "user proxy."

The proxy therefore acts as a web service that represents the user, and the device(s) that he or she uses. The result is that when a web service is written that is intended to be exposed directly to the end user, it will display in a consistent manner, subject to the constraints of the target device.

The idea is so unique that Webalo has a patent pending. IBM will host Webalo's initial service for end users (the company also offers an Eclipse plug-in for developers). Admittedly, this may sound a bit counter intuitive because whenever human workflows are described, they are typically associated with business process management approaches.

By contrast, web services are associated with fully automated dynamic processes, such as an order automatically triggering an inventory check service, and if inventory is available, then triggering a logistic service to generate a formal order commitment. But in fact, many web services at some point involve displaying a result to humans. For instance, a supply chain planner trying to optimize order fulfillment might at some point request that a dashboard or graph display available options.

That's where Webalo's user proxy comes in. Depending on whether the planner is on a desktop machine or using a mobile device, they need the results displayed in an intelligible, consistent fashion.

Webalo's user proxy is a slice of metadata that it maintains about the devices that the user operates. The proxy itself is exposed as a web service, so that when services are deployed, they trigger the proxy service as part of a composite application. For software developers, relying on a user proxy helps them observe modern software development practices, which separates or virtualizes the UI from the underlying logic, data, or connectivity.

Software developers writing application exposed in a services-oriented environment, in effect, write to a "super device" that is invoked whenever the service is deployed. In turn, end users or business analysts gain a higher level, wizard-driven approach for specifying how services are to display on their target devices.

What's interesting is that the idea of user proxy could in the long run expand from presentation to authentication and related security standards such as SAML or the rival WS-Federation for federated identity, and WS-Security and related standards, which in total could provide the building blocks for a single sign on user proxy.

Webalo however doesn't intend to get that ambitious, sticking to its knitting in UI. But there's certainly potential for a third party to roll up the Webalo hosted offering as part of a more global single sign on service for SOA environments.

Webalo's initial offering will be a mobile user dashboard, which lets business analysts and end users specify how analytic BI applications will display on their PDAs or smart phones. Eventually they hope to expand this to other SOA-enabled composite applications.

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