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Cut through the hype to see B2B potential



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

JIM CARROLL

To understand your career potential, you have to cut through the hype to get to the reality.

That's not easy to do if you're trying to assess the role of e-business in your future. You may work for an organization, for example, that has recently declared it is getting involved in a "B2B trading site."

Is your company on the right track? Maybe not. Countless chief executive officers in various industries are announcing in media conferences that they have established an "on-line B2B initiative" that will be used to support "billions of dollars of purchasing."

Although it can make for great press, generate huge market valuations for the business-to-business companies involved and leave senior managers convinced they are finally headed in the right direction, it may be smoke and mirrors.

Once the floodlights are turned off and the cameras stop rolling, you may find many executives going back to ignoring e-business. Worse, many of the initiatives announced will die on the vine for lack of executive support unless management demonstrates it is prepared to spend significant sums of money to link their "back-end systems" to the Web.

So how do you judge whether your company is serious about B2B? Take the time to find out how real e-business will be deployed, by understanding the technology that will be at the heart of any e-commerce effort — what is known as "middleware."

When the Internet was an infant, companies such as International Business Machines and Oracle developed what are known as APIs (application programming interfaces), tools that would allow a company to link an existing large-scale database to a Web site.

This was a huge development in the history of e-commerce, as it permitted firms to extend their transaction and financial systems to their customers and suppliers.

Federal Express attracted a lot of admirers in the mid-nineties when it permitted people to query its systems on the status of shipped packages. Big banks found that they had a tool to link their systems to a Web site, leading to the rapid emergence of on-line banking. Airlines could do the same, leading to Web-based on-line reservation systems.

Over time, these tools evolved into a more sophisticated category of software, called middleware. Today, several tools and programs allow a company to link its back-end financial, enterprise management, accounting, inventory and other transaction systems to a Web site. It is through such tools that real B2B will be deployed.

Which brings us back to the current round of announcements.

True B2B is a huge effort that involves large-scale hiring, massive budget resources and an organizational fervour dedicated to the task of linking a back-end system to the Web. If a company isn't doing that, then it's demonstrating little more than it knows how to generate a bit of media ink.

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Jim Carroll is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future, *and can be reached by e-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*