

Infor Snags Workbrain for Work Force Management

As part of the acquisition, Workbrain's work force automation software will become part of Infor's grand service-oriented architecture plans.

Infor, a company that's built itself into the world's third largest enterprise resource planning software company through acquisitions, announced April 2 that it has acquired another company: Workbrain.

Under the terms of the deal, Infor will acquire all of Workbrain's outstanding shares at a price of \$12.50 per share, or about \$227 million. The transaction has already been approved by Workbrain's board of directors and is expected to close in June.

Workbrain develops software that helps companies manage their work force through automation of areas like time and attendance, scheduling, absence management and work force planning. Infor will add the company's suite of applications to its human capital management software.

Workbrain itself will become the "hub" of Infor's HCM Center of Excellence, according to Jim Schaper, Infor's Chairman and CEO, who discussed the deal in an April 2 teleconference with press and analysts.

During the call David Ossip, Workbrain's CEO, said that while the company had initially planned to remain independent, an offer from Infor led to a change of heart.

"During the first half of last year, the company's board went through a process to determine the company's future," said Ossip. "Our decision was to continue as a stand-alone entity."

Ossip said that the company then received a unsolicited offer from Infor, but declined to comment on whether the company had entertained additional offers - particularly from Oracle, another serial acquirer rivaling Infor. But Ossip did add that it's hard to remain independent in today's market.

"In this rapidly consolidating marketplace we have all seen size and scale does matter," he said. "As part of this deal, Workbrain gains a customer base of more than 70,000 - users - and global distribution. We will continue to be the market leader in work force management."

In the past four years, Infor has acquired 21 enterprise companies that it categorizes in three separate groups: enterprise, strategic solutions and financial. Oracle, which also plays in the business applications market, has also made well more than 20 different acquisitions over the same time frame.

The companies, however, differ in their strategies. While Oracle is developing fusion applications, a sort of super suite that brings in the best of functionality from separate suites - PeopleSoft, JD. Edwards, Siebel and Oracle E-Business - Infor has decided not to undertake the strenuous exercise of integrating its many disparate products.

On March 13, the company announced its SOA (service-oriented architecture) strategy for evolving (rather than integrating) its products. Infor Open SOA, as the plan is referred to, is based on an event-driven distributed architecture that allows the orchestration of business events across Infor's applications, rather than the orchestration of services based on a business process.

In addition to breaking its applications into smaller sub-processes that are SOA-enabled, Infor will develop vertically-oriented blueprints that allow show users to deploy software components from Infor (and others) to orchestrate an event.

"The complexity of exposing 5,000 business services is if one percent of those services interact, that's going to be a quarter of a million events. We only allow events from outside to invoke business processes, not one to invoke the other," said Bruce Gordon, Infor's chief technology officer, in a March 19 interview with eWEEK.

"We have it down to 500 business events - much more course-grained sub processes that can operate and work together in unison."

In terms of "splitting" Infor's major products, Gordon gives the example of how the company broke down the applications in DataStream, a company it recently acquired.

"In their product there was a little bit of procurement, a little bit of inventory control and asset management," said Gordon. "We put blueprints on top and said we need to split this product into four pieces - let's have our own procurement, our own inventory management. We split it into four pieces and if a customer wants to use their own procurement, or Infor's, they can do that. We've service-enabled the different areas; with SOA the code can run independently."

Gordon said that Infor goes a step beyond SAP and Oracle, the world's first and second largest ERP providers, respectively, that are also pursuing SOA roadmaps. SAP and Oracle are service-enabling and splitting its major products and providing an event-driven strategy of workflow in blueprints.

"Whereas our competitors have workflow in a central area, we believe we need to drive - SOA - in smaller units, keep it very clear, and have events that start processes," Gordon said.

Infor will utilize a "publish and subscribe" model to asynchronously exchange business events between applications and services across an enterprise services bus it has licensed from Sonic Software. The company has licensed other components - a workflow engine, for example - from other partners, according to Gordon. It has also adopted the Open Applications Group Interoperability Standard as the native interface for all communications between its different software suites.

The company plans to introduce Open SOA in phases - incremental updates that are part of each suite's product release plans - and has its basic event-driven infrastructure in place. Gordon plans to complete the company's SOA roadmap in the next three or four years, including any new companies that are added to the portfolio.

"When we acquire a new company, we take them in ... they get a little bit of a shock. We don't want to homogenize them, skim off the cream and leave the rest behind, so what we do is look and work with each of the customer groups to understand vertical requirements, and then get them to match industry blueprints. So we don't have a Tower of Babel ."

While Gordon is looking at each of Infor's product lines, he's currently working across Baan, Mapics and Infinium.

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