

The 2007 Next-Gen OSS/BSS Integration Summit and the State of NGOSS

by Tim Young

This past month, I was able to attend the IQPC Next Gen OSS/BSS integration summit. It was a small event, and the attendance, while qualified and capable, was very small, indeed. However, over the course of the two and a half days in Tucson, there was some interesting discussion on next-gen telecom, standards, and the state of the industry.

The lovely part of having a relatively small group of qualified professionals all in one place for a few days is that conversation, both on-topic and off, is in ready supply. That can lead to conversations about absolutely anything, but with attendees from the United States, Canada, Germany, Suriname, Guyana, and other locales all bringing a different set of likes, dislikes, and norms to the table, common ground can always be found in chats about telecommunications. Therein lies the importance of an event like this: it is a venue for presentations, but also for focused, qualified conversation.

The pre-conference programming fostered just that type of discussion. In the session I attended, Nakina Systems Chief Solutions Architect Sergio Pellizzari led a discussion in which OSS vendors, service providers, and systems integrators discussed the difficulty of introducing meaningful standards into the telecom space, especially in a brownfield environment. The frank reality discussed was that while standards may be addressed in committee or on the drawing board, the realities of the market often involve adopting the quickest and easiest solution at the time, consequences be damned. This was naturally accompanied by a bit of ribbing of equipment manufacturers, since there were none in the room.

Frank discussion continued, though there were more than a few overt product pitches, awkward non-statements, and/or beleaguered talking points. That's par for the course at any event. Within the sessions alone there were many bright spots.

Peter Aiken (a talented speaker and a man-of-many-business-cards, representing the Data Management Association, Data Blueprint, and Virginia Commonwealth University) made reference to ATMs (think cash machines, not data link layer protocol) that were wrapping tiny pieces of transaction information consisting of a few bytes with XML wrappers weighing in at around 250 bytes. Aiken pointed out

that the result of that much data traveling over the very slow connections in every convenience store and truck stop in the world made for a serious traffic jam.

Johanne Mayer of Alcatel-Lucent (also half-wearing her TMF Board Member hat) gave an interesting presentation on transformation, noting shifts from "smokestack" network management to service-oriented operations. She emphasized Alcatel-Lucent's heavy involvement in standards. She also pointed out that convergence isn't just about technology. Changes in technology are prompting changes in the organizations of some carriers. Convergence in one area should lead to convergence in the other if companies are to stay as lean and competitive as possible. Some other lessons-learned that Mayer presented include the idea that processes and best practices should be standardized across organizational boundaries, the necessity of end-to-end service quality, and the importance of a solutions architect.



Ziaur Rahman of T-Mobile served as the chair of the event, and added his considerable knowledge and amiable demeanor to several panels as well. One of his events dealt with governance and how it deals with transformation, modernization, and NGOSS implementation. The challenges listed included support for new business priorities, support for new product/technology lifecycle, and support for "always on," as well as supporting scalability and leveraging existing infrastructure.

Other events of note included several panel discussions on modern OSS trends and NGOSS, a discussion between Rahman, Chris McCasland of Nuvox, and Andy Fraley of Subex-Azure on inventory management, an address on next-gen service bundle automation by Bob Titus of NetCracker, interesting talks by Gaston Ormazabel and George Morris of Verizon, a piece on evolving wireless networks by Sprint Nextel's Fabrice Cornet-Libon, and an more than a few comments by the animated Mike Singh of Telkom Caribe on the market realities of the Caribbean and, by extension, much of the developing world.

All spoke, to tie these diverse presentations together with the widest of umbrellas, on how OSS has evolved and the natural pitfalls that have been the result of haste or myopia by the original developers.

The truth is, modern OSS is simply not sustainable. There is a genuine need for flexible and cost-efficient solutions for ever-changing landscape of next-gen service offerings. Increased competition among CSPs leads to increased pressure on systems integrators and OSS vendors to keep costs low. Inertia, however, is a killer. Change in internal business processes is never easy, and objects at rest tend to remain at rest.

As was astutely pointed out during the conference, it's not entirely accurate to lump all next-gen OSS/BSS in with NGOSS. NGOSS is something very specific. It's New Generation (NOT "next-generation") Operation Systems and Software, and it's based around five key principles:

- Separation of Business Process from Component Implementation
- Loosely Coupled Distributed System
- Shared Information Model
- Common Communications Infrastructure
- Contract-Defined Interfaces

The details of all of these could be found on the website of the TM Forum, as NGOSS has been that body's flagship program for the better part of a decade.

And what is the ultimate goal of NGOSS? A conversation with Wedge Greene, a frequent contributor to this publication and an NGOSS pioneer, reminds us that the goal was to reduce costs significantly (even, in early NGOSS plans, drastically), as well as reducing time to market, increasing flexibility, and incorporating long-term vision that is often missing within new projects. "Vendors," according to Greene, "are rewarded for their efforts with reduced development costs and increased built-in relevance for niche players."

There are benefits for systems integrators, too. Martin Creaner, the CEO of the TM Forum, said a few years ago in this very magazine that "While custom integration projects are typically the boon of telecom system integrators, mounting pressure from service providers to cut costs forces SIs to make their projects more predictable and repeatable, and thus less customized, to retain their margins."

So the dust has settled and many points about NGOSS have been rattled off by many. Is NGOSS ready for prime time? At the March '07 iteration of this same event, "Willy" Seibert of Vodafone, noting his excitement over NGOSS and its potential exclaimed, "It works! It really works!" His enthusiasm was based on a 50% savings in development capital and ongoing expenses over point-to-point TMN. Other especially meaningful projects have been documented at BT, Deutsche Telekom, and others. Literally hundreds of case studies available through the TMF.

There are lots of issues still to address. Infighting and politicking within organizations is always bound to be a setback for the adoption of new and different standards and services. The accusation has been made that, due to the sheer complexity of the architecture and its ramifications, true understanding of NGOSS is limited to a relatively small 'brain trust' of individuals. Furthermore, one of those that could be considered among that 'brain trust' notes that few, if any, of the original developers of NGOSS is currently being retained for his or her expertise on the subject.

The question arises: Do carriers, vendors, and equipment manufacturers really care about NGOSS beyond lipservice? Do standards make enough of a difference to risk capital and buck trends? According to one person to whom I spoke during the event, it is difficult to escape the feeling that "it's a great concept but no one is at the helm and only few people know how to sail...and they're doing something else right now." In an interview we did with Martin Creaner, once again, last month leading up to TMW- Dallas, he mentioned that NGOSS is basically done, it works, and it will become a background for all other conversations. It seems NGOSS is fully ready for the industry. Why, oh why, doesn't some of the industry seem ready for NGOSS?

The IQPC Next-Gen OSS/BSS Integration Summit was a great place to try to answer some of those burning questions. There were, to some extent, more questions raised than answers given, but that is to be expected. My sincere hope is that the event becomes annual rather than taking place twice a year, moves to a location that is more accessible by the average attendee (Tucson was a direct flight from Chicago, but almost everyone else had to make at least two hops), and focuses its energy and considerable value on a single event. I know I would make the trip.

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