

Universal Vocabulary Could Break E-Commerce Language Barrier

Rita E. Knox

To overcome the jumble of languages used in e-commerce by various companies, OASIS, an XML standards group, wants to define a Universal Business Language based on reusable terms rather than whole transactions.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 17 October 2001, the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS), a nonprofit consortium that promotes development of XML as the foundation descriptive language for e-commerce, announced it formed a technical committee to define a Universal Business Language (UBL). UBL would provide a set of XML building blocks and a framework that will enable trading partners to exchange business documents in specific contexts.

Analysis

Enterprises eager for standard, reusable vocabularies to facilitate e-commerce no longer fret over who will win the markup language skirmish. Rather, they want to know how to:

- Build transactions in XML
- Exchange data with business partners, customers and vendors
- Assure longevity in the XML data messages that they do adopt

Instead of a "one true way" consensus XML language, Gartner believes that the answer lies in building e-commerce transactions from *reusable* XML vocabularies that adopt the same terms when the same meanings and interpretations (by applications) are intended. The components of business exchanges (e.g, "company," "address," "part number" and "price") recur in different messages and among different industries. However, custom XML-defined transactions in every line of business would perpetuate proprietary solutions. If each exchange is unique (i.e., it uses new terms even if the same meaning is intended), computers will confront a tangle of incompatible languages; therefore, they will be unable to share data or reuse software to process the same data stream. OASIS knows about the proliferation of markup languages — it maintains a database of proposed standards (see www.xml.org). By taking a mediating role in resolving the markup language fracas, OASIS can help achieve cost and time savings in many processes in many industries.

Initially, UBL aims to prevent chaos by defining a specific vocabulary for e-commerce. If successful, UBL may then prove useful as a framework for creating "words" in other fields such as science, healthcare, politics or art. Despite uncertainty over how this initiative will be executed in what will likely be a contentious environment, OASIS's attempt to create vocabularies rather than complete transactions takes a step that enterprises understand and seem ready to support. Enterprises should therefore monitor UBL's process and stay tuned to Gartner's periodic progress reports. They also should review current XML solutions that might meet their near-term e-commerce transaction needs until more general solutions appear.

Analytical Source: Rita Knox, Integrated Document & Output Management

Written by Michael Gomez, gartner.com

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters
56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters
Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters
Level 7, 40 Miller Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Latin America Headquarters
Av. das Nações Unidas 12.551
9 andar—WTC
04578-903 São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509