How To Develop Service Standards That Avoid Finger Pointing!

Over the last ten years, Open Systems and the Internet have resulted in an explosion of IT products, technologies and services but with this comes increased complexity of systems and interoperability problems, Leigh Darby, Executive Director of TSANet Europe, reflects on the subject of service standards and goes on to explore how TSANet's framework and code of practice can be applied to help combat some of these issues.

"The nice thing about standards is that there are so many to choose from." This famous quote from leading IT expert Dr. Andrew S. Tanenbaum refers to the 'Unix wars' which took place in the late eighties between the various factions of the relatively immature Open Systems marketplace. At the time, Vendors took sides on which variety of Unix would win the day (primarily to drive hardware sales) leaving customers confused about which versions of Unix worked together … after all wasn't Unix a universal standard?

Standards are confusing, and this doesn't just apply to the IT market, there are more common examples. How many different power plug 'standards' are there? Most travel bag always have an adaptor or two lurking inside. Clothing and shoe sizes are different in Europe compared to North America. The important point is that once we know the rules and the differences we can cope with the situation relatively well.

Standards In The Complex World Of Enterprise IT Systems

Open Systems and the Internet have resulted in an explosion of IT products and technologies over the last ten years. The real enabler of Open Systems is TCP/IP and the ability to flexibly add devices to an ever expanding network. TCP/IP is a classic example of a de facto standard – a white paper submitted to the IEEE in 1974 and adopted for various separate US government projects, takes hold in academic institutions then large corporations. The rest is history. Bear in mind as TCP/IP based systems were being deployed and use was accelerating, many industry influencers and analysts said this was an inferior protocol to other networking options. However customers and vendors voted with their cheque books and TCP/IP triumphed.

Looking across all aspects of technology at all the different layers and interfaces we see the same evolutionary struggles as standards emerge and are either endorsed or become redundant – ATM, IDE, IEEE 1394 (aka Firewire), NetBIOS, PCI, SATA, SQL, SCSI, SMI-S, USB - the list goes on. The upside for the customer is a wide selection of products based around a particular set of standards which creates fierce competition and more favourable pricing as classic market forces apply.

The Interoperability Blues

The downside for customers and vendors alike is this; the number of potential product configurations and interactions is infinite. But surely whatever the configuration, products should all seamlessly 'plug and play' as they are developed?

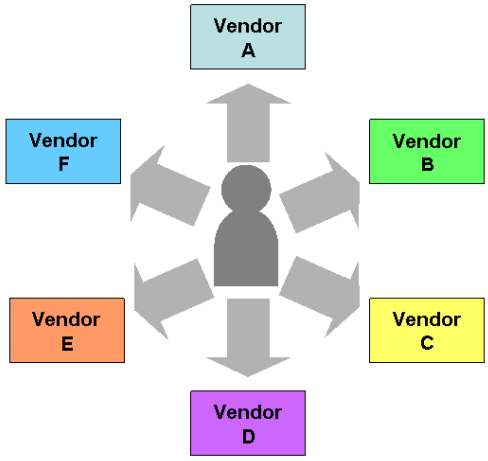
As IT becomes ever more strategic to the business, this means most applications become mission-critical. Managing interoperability issues relating to these mission critical applications is key to successful customer relationships. Products developed to standards should work together and in most cases do. But total seamless interoperability cannot be 100% guaranteed - not every product implementation can be realistically checked with every other. And for some mission-critical applications even a 0.00001% failure rate is just not acceptable.

One strategy that has developed as a result of interoperability concerns is for a vendor or a cluster of vendors to create, maintain and promote a certification standard and compliance process. An example of this was the VERITAS, Oracle, Sun (VOS) initiative formed in 2000. The purpose of this cluster was to offer customers a high level of comfort that IT solutions would operate effectively and reliably together. Another example was the Supported Solutions Forum (SSF) formed by the Storage Networking Industry Association (SNIA). SSF was set up to offer the customer a higher degree of confidence since a SAN product from an SSF compliant vendor had undergone the SSF certification process and hence was tested in certain configurations.

These product-centric initiatives work in particular circumstances and are very logical and credible attempts to overcome the interoperability conundrum. The challenge is that a savvy customer may conclude that if vendors or an industry body such as SNIA needs to adopt such certifying strategies to increase confidence then one way or another there must be some knock-on effect in product and service prices – all this extra infrastructure costs money to develop and maintain which in turn has to be paid for. The promise of true 'plug and play' Open Systems is to some degree compromised by such necessities.

For the most part there is always a chance that products will continue to go wrong when connected to each other, no matter how sophisticated the certification programme or development testing procedures. The debate must move on to what happens next, customers and vendors must look at creating equally robust service-centric strategies and processes to minimise down time if and when this happens.

It's Not What You Do But How You Do It



The single most important measure of customer service satisfaction is 'how quickly can you fix my problem'. One vendor's support infrastructure should be able to interoperate with another vendor's just as easily as their own products. From a customer's point of view the worst case scenario would typically be to deal with each of their vendors support organisations separately (see Diagram 1). This can lead to the undesirable side-effect commonly known as 'finger pointing' rather than collaborating to resolve the issue.

Figure 1 – Complex interoperability issues could require many vendor support interactions to resolve

A natural customer reaction to overcome multiple vendor relationships is to appoint a single service and support provider who may be independent (a systems integrator) or a strategic vendor who can in turn form support agreements with vendors. Whilst this approach reduces interactions for the customer and can spread risk among partners, it may not result in reduced down-time if the support provider in turn is simply replicating the same support relationship model with separate vendor contracts.

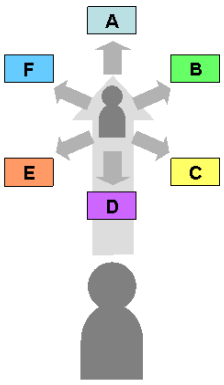


Figure 2 – Appointing a single support provider reduces interactions for the customer but perhaps not the provider

In addition when the vendor or service provider is not in complete control of the problem fix this in turn becomes the problem of the provider the customer places the issue with.

Not All Service Level Agreements Are Equal

Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are the typical support contract model for most customer-to-vendor and vendor-to-vendor support interactions. An SLA consists of a series of fairly generic clauses and terms that describe who does what, when and how. When the SLA is between vendors it is normally referred to as a Co-operative Support Agreement (CSA). The problem with most SLA and CSA strategies adopted is that each one is 'hand crafted' and therefore expensive. If the same approach of standardisation could be applied to the technical support interface that we take for granted with products would that not make problem resolution more cost effective and reliable?

In 1993, a group of service and support managers from a cluster of product vendors decided to do something about this issue and formed the Technical Support Alliance Network (TSANet). TSANet was set up to form a common CSA, an International Code of Conduct, one document signed by all parties. Members essentially agree to offer each other reciprocal support services (quid pro quo) as if it was the mutual customer contacting them. Over the 14 years since its inception the TSANet model has become the de facto standard in how to offer a 'level playing field' between vendors including those who may ordinarily be competitors. The same Code of Conduct applies now as it did in 1993.

The objective is to ensure customers are not 'bounced' between vendors and that response and resolution times are reduced. Customers can contact any vendor from whom they are entitled to support knowing that their issue will pass between TSANet members (see Diagram 3).

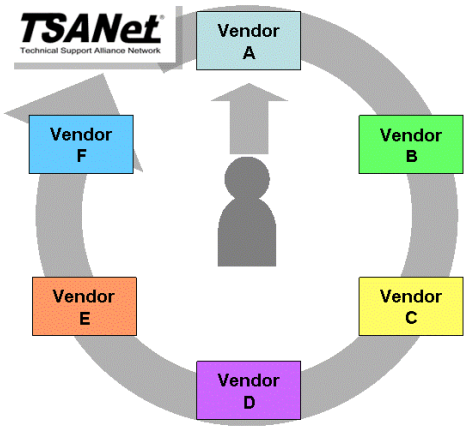


Figure 3 – Adopting a common set of agreements and sharing support contact processes via TSANet

The model has been refined and enhanced with time. TSANet members can form and join more specialised relationships with each other based around common agreed response times.

Conclusion - Continuous Improvement in Service Level Agreements is vital

The Internet has created a fundamental change in the way that data centres operate today. It enables vendors to deliver faster response times, self-service and other new forms of service delivery. However, product quality, value and reliability must also improve. Without a doubt products will get 'smarter' reducing the need for routine support queries. However, as products continue to improve so must service and support standards. Even if product reliability exceeds 99.999999% the support infrastructure must be ready to handle the tiny proportion of problems arising, swiftly and effectively. In order to achieve positive support interaction requires an improvement in SLA's and CSA's. Only by looking to adopt common support agreements and operational frameworks will support teams be able to work together more effectively reducing downtime when faced with complex interoperability issues. By collaborating vendors will create positive customer relationships, a win:win for all concerned.

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