

Forum 2.0?

Keith Willetts co-founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors talks to Intercomms about how the TM Forum is evolving to support the key trends in the industry



Keith Willetts, Chairman, The TeleManagement Forum

Keith Willetts is recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on communications management. As co-founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the TeleManagement Forum, he has been the driving force behind its continuous evolution.

Currently Managing Partner at Mandarin Associates Ltd. in the UK, he consults with companies on a wide variety of business development issues. He previously held executive positions at BT and TCSI.

A regular presenter and writer, he co-authored the highly influential book, "The Lean Communications Provider". His achievements have been internationally recognized, being honored twice in the Communications Week "Top 25" awards for industry visionaries, the British Computer Society award and the BT Gold Medal.

Q: What are the changes are underway at the TM Forum, what you've jokingly called Forum 2.0?

A: We're making some big steps forward our underpinning collaboration programmes. There are

several dimensions to this. One is to broaden the footprint of our technical work, which has been primarily focussed on business operations for telecom companies. We are moving that outward because of the growing supply chain that the communications companies are involved with now. They are looking at upstream partners for content and advertising, looking for downstream partners for devices and looking at a whole range of innovative service providers throughout. The underlying fact is that communication services on their own are not going to provide the engine of growth for the communication companies and they are all looking to broaden their service portfolio.

Q: What are the issues that need to be addressed?

A: One large Tier 1 operator told me they had 180 content partners. To provide a quality service at an economic cost across the multitude of players is going to be very difficult. People who excel at that are people like Tesco and Wal-Mart who have it down to a fine art, but it is not a core competency amongst communications companies. We are looking at several manifestations of that breadth. We have set up a number of projects like the Content Encounter – to really understand the issues of creating, delivering and monetizing services across a complex value chain. To really start to engage in tangible technical work, the Content Encounter is now focussing on an initial crop of APIs and trading APIs in the value chain. These are quite basic things such as payment mechanisms between players. There are also, all sorts of complexities; did the customer get what the customer paid for? If not, who's fault is that? Who has to rebate whom? It's the same with passing content, when you pass content to A-to-B-to-C, it comes with a whole lot of contractual information around it, basic stuff like digital rights, one time use, multiple use or permanent use? Which region in the world is that licensed for? There is also a whole lot of technical information that comes with content; the management interface a common metadata model, in which multiple parties in the chain agree that is the way we are going to do it.

Q: What about the consumer?

A: A key issue is the customer care level, where there isn't an agreed way between players in the value chain of notifying each other of problems, resolving those problems and all the complexities that go with that. That is what people; especially the upstream players saying they would want to see. Telcos actually solved that a long time ago. That is fairly low hanging fruit. It is an extension of what telecom has already done, but into broader market.

Q: How is your technical focus evolving?

A: The second major initiative is around the depth of our technical work, we have focussed mainly on operations systems for communications. We know that the whole software world is mushrooming and services are increasingly software derived. It used to be that the system was there to support the network and the network was where you had the product. The product is now increasingly coming from software – voice mail, text, all sorts of complex feature functionality. Software delivery platforms are gaining a lot of traction now. How do you wrap a software delivery platform with your BSS systems and OSS systems?

Q: How do you reach out to the broader market place that doesn't even understand the term OSS?

A: One of the things we are doing is taking a look at our core frameworks, our information framework, our information framework, our process framework and systems framework and so on. What do you need to do that is relevant to a non telecom audience. Getting rid of the telecom acronyms helps as will better integration in cohesive set of frameworks. We are calling this the 'Blueprint Initiative'. We wanted a new term for the tight integration of our existing framework; de-telecomising it, making it more relevant to other players in the value chain and making sure we are in line with modern software practice. One of the key drivers is the Service Oriented Architecture so, whether you buy that service in or you have a piece of software of your own, it doesn't matter, it's a set of functional service sets.

► **Q: What about your collaboration programmes?**

A: There is also a lot of work going on in our core collaboration programmes making easier and faster to generate new standards in the Forum. Our historic model has been a group of experts coming together to solve a problem. When you have that however, you've only reached the first base. Then you have industry uptake which can take several years. Our flagship, the eTOM process model, took six years to get to the level of maturity it is at now. The SID was conceived in 2001 but only really now gaining traction in the market place in the past couple of years. That timescale is not commensurate with the speed of the market. We want to learn some lessons from the rise of social networking; Wikipedia and Google's Knol - a wholly new approach to sharing knowledge, enabling millions of people around the world can to share knowledge in a structured way. We want to learn from that. We already have 100,000 people who use our tools but perhaps only a few hundred people at the heart of it, creating them. The way to bridge that gap is to open up the way we develop things to an online wiki approach although you have to have strong peer level review. The key is to still produce high quality standards but cut the timescale and get more users involved. That means we have to have a multi-tiered approach to standards – a standards maturity model.

Q: What does this mean in practice?

A: In one example a major service provider was working on large project using our Information Framework. They thought it was good but there were areas that they felt it didn't have enough richness. They proposed some changes and that went through our formal change control process. Various people looked at it and it took several months before it got agreed and released to users. In the new model, those changes would be out there in the public domain immediately but with appropriate markings to say that it was not peer reviewed yet. The review work would go on in parallel. We envisage a number of levels of maturity of standards



but instead of only exposing the completed and finished work, the additions and extensions would be available on the web at once for people to use if they wish. The same will be true of our Prosspero interfaces programme. It takes quite a while to develop and mature standards but what a lot of the development teams who are under the gun need are quick fixes. Putting things out in the public domain will make it easier for those thousands of people who aren't really engaged in our technical programme to come back to us to help improve it.

Q: When will we begin to see the effects of these changes?

A: These initiative are going on in parallel, they are all going to be explained in Orlando. It is a fairly big investment for us in terms of software collaboration platform to enable all of that. At the same time, we don't want to lose what we've got which is a very high quality reputation for good work. You will start to see that from of that late this year, early 2009 when a lot of these things go live and on line.

Q: How do you capture the knowledge online?

A: We are setting up our Transformation Resource Centre to establish a strong body of knowledge on transforming the digital service world and offer that to our members. Some of it is brand new, some of which we are already doing but doing so in a more structured way and formalised way for example linking case studies and white papers. We've also hired some top notch analysts to provide us with an industry research arm, so we can look in factual detail at some of these changes in the market place and put some statistics and 'meat' behind them.

Q: Doesn't this require a lot of investment by the TM Forum?

A: There is a lot of investment there. Fortunately we have been growing as an organisation and have generated the financial muscle and breadth of resources to make the investment.

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