All Aboard

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 and CEO, TM Forum.

Keith Willetts is Chairman and CEO of the TM Forum and was its co-founder. He has served as Chairman, board member and advisor to a number of other companies as well as executive positions at BT. His international experience working with service providers; software companies and consulting firms has given him a very broad view of the industry and he is widely regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on the business management of services and networks. His achievements have been internationally recognized, recently being numbered in GTB's '100 Most influential' people in the communications industry; being honoured twice in the Communications Week "Top 25" awards for industry visionaries; awarded the British Computer Society's Gold Medal for innovation and the BT Gold Medal for innovation as well as authoring the influential book, "The Lean Communications Provider."

Q: How's the Forum doing in these challenging times?

A: Actually extremely well – we just completed our financial year at the end of March and on every measure, it has been our best ever year – more members, more training, more people at events and webinars, more people engaged in our collaboration programs and, a whole slew of new initiatives. In fact, we'd done so well on attracting new members that we have been able to increase our investments into technology programs while building up our financial reserves for what looks like a challenging year ahead. But we're well prepared - like everyone we've done some timely cost cutting and so we're in very good shape to keep delivering to our members even in the difficult times ahead for our industry.

Q: What changes are you making to the TM Forum's management structure and why?

A: One of the major changes is in our Board structure. The Forum has evolved from a period in which there were no staff and the Board ran the organisation. Over the years, it has evolved a full-time professional staff based around the world and the Board's role has become ever more strategic in nature. We are continuing that process by appointing strategic level Board, consisting of 'C' level executives from many of the big industry players around the world who will meet twice a year to set strategy. In addition, we have appointed a working level Executive Committee, who are responsible for routine oversight of the Forum and its programs. This is a reflection of the growing strategic importance of the Forum to industry: we are seeing more and more top executives wanting to help steer the organisation as the critical nature of our work has risen. These senior executives, however don't have much time, so we have split the responsibilities to allow them to focus on strategy and direction at a twice yearly, face-to-face, strategic level session parallel to monthly board meetings of the executive committee, to manage the ongoing affairs of the organisation.

Q: Why make the changes in board structure now?

A: It reflects the growth of the organisation. Historically, our board has consisted of hands-on managers and as we have grown, so has the stature of the board as more senior executives have joined. That has resulted in some board members who want to look at the top level strategic issues and others wanting to look at detailed issues. Trying to handle that as a board, especially one as large as ours, is really quite difficult So we looked at a number of alternative governance models. A typical model in Europe, particularly in Germany and Scandinavia, is to have a management board and a strategic board - the GSMA had taken a similar route. The TM Forum Board will now meet twice a year to set top level direction and strategy supported by an Executive Committee that will drill down into issues in a more detailed way. We will have the first new style board meetings in Nice in May but we will also be putting out a series of announcements over the coming months as we add new people to that board. There are a number of people who have indicated that they would be willing to join the board and there will be some high profile announcements over the next months.

Q: What are you doing to move the Forum to the forum taking more of an industry leadership position as opposed to just a technology position?

A: This is a very important goal for us and we are doing many things. For example, we have significantly expanded the range of 'thought leadership' publications we produce. We now publish 6 regular Inside news magazines in different languages and aimed at different industry segments. Added to that is our; 'Perspectives' Yearbook, that has just been published in print and online. We are also beginning a series of Insights industry research reports, which supplement our existing benchmarking reports with in depth industry analysis and comment. The first full report on transformation which will be shortly after the Nice conference and we are planning a short Quick Insights paper on mobile advertising for release at Nice. We will publish about six of these in-depth research reports a year, which is an interesting new departure for us.

Q: What else is going on?

A: We are strengthening and growing our extensive collaboration programme by appointing a number of new people and investing in a comprehensive "web 2.0" online collaboration platform. This combines our extensive website with best-in-breed professional networking (e.g. open communities blogs and discussion boards etc) with a professional, source code management platform. We are committed to reinforce and grow our collaboration programmes even in the downturn and are pressing ahead with expanding not just the number of members but expanding the number of online communities that engage with us. We also want to expand considerably into the developer community because a lot of the decisions regarding which technologies to use are made by developers, based on timescale and budget. We want to provide a very strong capability for developers which goes beyond our current framework to leverage the whole move to open source and to make more software components available. We have been investing in a new collaboration programme. The changes will be pretty significant and will open up the Forum's work to many new designers, strategists, developers and implementers around the world.

Q: How are you doing this?

A: From the early days of the Forum, technical teams would be formed by people physically getting together at one of our events at 'Birds of a Feather' sessions to establish if there was enough interest to launch a team. That led to setting up a project charter and then the work itself which in some cases can run on for months or even years. It has worked well but tended to be bit of a closed world - you had to be a member of the team to see all of this material and so nobody really knew much about what was going on until it was finished and published. That's only one of the downsides of that approach. In addition, these getting physically together is more difficult because of travel restrictions and the truly global nature of the Forum – we have members in 185 countries! Also, when the team published its work, there was then a slow process of discovery and implementation. The eTOM has now gone through that process several times. With the new collaboration platform, teams become online web 2.0 communities – very easy to join and very easy to see what's going on – the latest thinking and so on. Tools like Wiki's, discussion threads and blogs help the process considerably to engage a much wider audience. Any member of the Forum can see the work and comment while it is evolving. You get a much bigger community, particularly as the work gets more mature with much greater live feedback on it, with people starting to try it out at an early stage. We have also introduced a maturity model to help people sort mature work from new but untested ideas as well as download counters and user feedback capabilities so that users can judge for themselves when to adopt evolving work - a bit like Ebay, you can make your own judgement.

The Web 2.0 approach does things in a more open way. It is more visible and you have earlier access to the Technical Working Group. You have earlier feed back from the field and it is very much easier for practitioners to implement any changes back in. It used to be something of a dark art, sending it into the team. Now you can go online and self publish then it goes through a maturing process to get adopted.

We have also implemented a sophisticated source code management platform called SourceForge that gives us much greater sophistication tools and facilities for developers to collaborate - source code management; change control and software builds. The whole platform is fully integrated and looks completely seamless to the user. The early feed back from members is that it's great after we tried it out at the Team Action Week recently held in Lisbon. As we get teams moved over to the new environment we are seeing every significant growth in the people engaged in those communities.

Q: What role does the Blueprint project play in all this?

A: We are an organisation that facilitates what our members want us to do. That was alright when there was a relatively small number of programmes but when you get up to 80 or so as we have today, without a strong cohesive force between them, members become confused as to how all the bits fit together. We are now bringing together a number of those pieces into one cohesive technology road map for the industry called the Blueprint project and we have brought in some experts to help us. What we are building is an SOA based approach that will pull together the process of frameworks into a set of re-usable building blocks. Think of them as Lego bricks where you can build any particular type of service, whether that is fixed, mobile, content based etc - they all have different business models and different needs but you can build any one of those out of reusable standardised pieces. I think this squares the circle of the needs of service providers and suppliers to differentiate themselves within a standardised framework.

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