TECHNOLOGY FOCUS

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Focus on the blur

Our guest columnist speaks from a practical, hands-on perspective about data integration, an activity that organisations are beginning to recognise as an ongoing responsibility that needs strategic commitment.

With the proliferation of data sources and stores, the management challenge grows alongside the burgeoning opportunities for companies to learn about their customers, evolve their offerings and improve their performance.

In Julie Hunt's arresting phrase, upcoming landmarks fast turn into "blurred moments". We seem to be consuming the future faster than ever, adapting to new technologies with ease and recalibrating our expectations – at home and at work. We now expect to access everything we need at any time, in any place, from any device.

But we also need reassurance the data we are accessing is correct, meaningful and timely. We need to know information types mean the same thing in different contexts. Access to reliably meaningful data helps us take action – otherwise we just have information overload.

Data standards and data-management discipline are moving to the centre of organisational strategy. This is part and parcel of the search for greater agility, the pressure of increased competition and the heightened expectations of customers. Data integration is the art of safeguarding meaning in the blur of progress. ∎

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Managing data in an anytime, anywhere world

With a growing 'mobile first' mindset for workers, enterprises must enable as much functionality for their employees as possible while also ensuring data and corporate security
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Julie Hunt, business software consultant

Gartner has predicted this year "mobile phones will overtake PCs as the most common web access device worldwide" and "by 2015 media tablet shipments will reach around 50% of laptop shipments".

The prevalence of "work anywhere" devices heralds a time of unprecedented change that is partly being driven by mobile and cloud computing. The milestones predicted by Gartner are not endpoints but soon may be blurred moments in the evolution of the mobile workforce and the development of new ways to deliver business applications. Of course there are new wrinkles for data management and data integration as these trends take on momentum.

Data, data everywhere
In a sense, business data is now strewn everywhere. No longer locked behind firewalls in managed data repositories, data lives many places outside the enterprise, as software-as-a-service and mobile software offerings keep pace with worker preferences for tools. Internal document-sharing tools are giving way to cloud services like Dropbox. End-to-end task workflows may even take place on multiple platforms. Part of this evo-

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lution, driven by cloud and mobile, continues to manifest as "shadow IT" – but savvy IT groups and enterprises are catching on the evolution cannot be stopped, so it is best to jump in and start working out how to administer the preferred tools of the workforce.

We now have enterprise data stored on multiple platforms, inside and outside the firewall, with varying levels of security and varying levels of portability. Data management and governance, as well as flexible data-integration processes, are central components of acquiring and integrating cloud and mobile data with on-premises data repositories. Data in the cloud has been a significant challenge for a while, with each cloud service providing proprietary application programming interfaces as the

main means for connecting to data. But data residing on mobile devices introduces a whole new world of challenges, including serious security concerns. IT has to rethink data-management strategies and processes to integrate mobile device usage with applications in the enterprise and cloud services.

Embracing consumerisation
Integration-as-a-service (IaaS) is one option to make it easier to connect to mobile devices as part of new integration processes for corralling data that now lives in many places. To a certain extent IaaS can provide pre-defined integrations for business users, a strategy which aligns well with the changes in how employees want to work and become more productive. IaaS services can be embedded in cloud offerings, set up by IT groups or offered as a specific service provided by a vendor.

The consumerisation of IT requires upper management, IT and business users work together to ensure everyone has the productivity tools that fit best, while establishing new governance and security procedures to protect the enterprise. Corporate data assets, no matter where they are created, used or stored, still require centralised management. However, data management protocols have to be balanced with enabling the workforce to leverage cloud and mobile technologies to perform work more effectively on behalf of the

enterprise. In a sense, the consumerisation of IT opens the door to improved user experiences with enterprise technologies.

Mobile first? Data first
The future of software applications for mobile devices is ultimately about providing the workforce with the data they need, when they need it and where they need it. With a growing "mobile first" mindset for workers, enterprises must enable as much functionality for their employees as possible while also ensuring data and corporate security.

As the devices available to workers continue to proliferate and to fragment data, the standing of data integration as a mission critical technology escalates. What has changed for data integration solutions is the demand for many different ways integration processes can be created and used. Not only do data integration platforms need to be high performance, they must continue to innovate ways to connect to data where it lives and then perform any number of actions to take data where it is needed. ∎

Julie Hunt has worked in business software for more than 25 years and is experienced in data integration, analytics, content management, digital marketing and collaboration. She also blogs at juliehuntconsulting.com. This article first appeared in the Data Integration blog published by Actian.