

Is .NET workable?



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.NET will mature and its time will come. Just like Windows replaced DOS, .NET will someday replace traditional Windows applications.

Several years have passed since Microsoft introduced its .NET platform to the masses. The initial release of the concept burst onto the computer scene with all the hype of a Superbowl extravaganza. This platform would revolutionize the way consumers across the globe used software, it was said.

What is .NET?

Why the .NET mania? In simple terms, .NET technology would allow software (at least in the Windows PC space) to morph into a subscription-based service that housed data in a central location and made its format compatible across many types of software and hardware platforms. Subscribers to the service would store their data using a Microsoft or Microsoft Certified Partner's server and, for a fee, be able to access this data at any time using a compatible device located anywhere.

Microsoft intended to recast its entire product line and business direction. All Microsoft business products would become .NET-branded and -enabled. Its operating system would become Windows.NET. Office productivity applications would become Office.NET. Database server applications like SQL would become SQL Server.NET and so on. Using .NET development tools, third-party software developers would create .NET-enabled software that integrated fully with other .NET products. The promise of this system was that data could be shared across the Internet, allowing users with different "smart" devices (cell phones,

Microsoft's new .NET Technology is all the buzz. But what does it all really mean to the average Joe?



Those who use .NET can find several good resources to help them make the most of the platform.

PDAs, laptops), different operating systems and different software to access the same data seamlessly.

For example, if you were on a jobsite in Alaska repairing a section of the Alaskan pipeline and needed more materials on site, you could pull out your laptop or PDA from under several layers of protective fleece clothing, access your inventory and submit a requisition form all before the keyboard froze from the cold. With the data from that requisition form in the .NET format, your accounting, job costing, inventory and project management systems would be instantly updated. What's more, the vendor could access that same data and it would be compliant with his own accounting, inventory and shipping systems, allowing instant use of the information.

A change in .NET focus

Although techies across the globe salivated with anticipation at the mere thought of the possibilities available to them through .NET, the actual outcome has transformed from its original objective.

Why the change? First, in a day and age of identity theft, consumers simply didn't trust the idea of handing their important and personal data over to

someone else. Second, the realistic contributions that .NET could make as a new platform were embellished through marketing spin and IT gossip. Bill Gates, co-founder of the Microsoft Corporation, originally said in June 2000 of .NET that "we are on the brink of a new computing revolution." However, two years later, he admitted, "we haven't made as much progress as we expected." For .NET to work as originally touted, the world's hardware and software would have had to be completely redeveloped. Consumers and the development marketplace just weren't eager or ready to make such an abrupt switch. In fact, many Microsoft critics dismissed the idea from the beginning. John Dvorak, contributing editor for *PC Magazine* and radio talk show host, called the whole .NET idea "ludicrous and creepy," saying that "Microsoft ... has lost touch with users."

Microsoft has decided to scale back the scope of .NET and focus more on behind-the-scenes development of .NET-compliant software. While it is no longer tagging all of its products with the .NET moniker, the company is adding bits of .NET technology to many of its core products,

and it has released versions of its development tools that facilitate creation of third-party .NET-enabled products.

So what is .NET today, after the buildup, let down and restructure? Probably where it was always meant to be by the software engineers that created it—it's a new computer-programming platform for the software development community, and it's a really, really cool one at that. The underlying technology offers a clean, uniform environment that enables programmers to more quickly write stable and secure programming code.

What's this mean for the construction business?

The original vision of .NET, if made reality, would have equaled productivity nirvana for most software users. Microsoft still hopes to achieve the goal of complete integration of data, but the push to accomplish this has

been slowed by reality. The latest versions of many Microsoft products have (or will soon have) elements of the .NET technology that allow you to create and store data in the interchangeable format. A limited number of .NET-enabled products are available on the marketplace. But until the .NET battle is won, the results of these features are not very apparent for the average user.

In fact, Microsoft's Web site lists only one construction-related partner producing .NET-enabled software. It focuses on sharing CAD data. As more are added, the integration between products will grow. Imagine the ability to automatically share details from CAD drawings with an unrelated project management software. The possibilities of data integration are limitless. For a shop with all .NET-enabled software, every bit of data, from the measurement of a widget to the profit margin for that widget can be given a "tag" or name. Each software can then recognize the data by name and use it where appropriate.

Like the platforms before it, .NET will mature and its time will come. Just like Windows replaced DOS, .NET will someday replace traditional Windows applications. However, in this author's opinion, it is unlikely that the transition will be completed anytime soon. So if you're interested in eventually hopping on the .NET bandwagon, you should keep your eye on developers looking at the .NET platform and stick with programs that are scalable to .NET, such as Microsoft server and database applications. By doing this, you can stay aligned with advances in technology and, with any luck, will minimize software upgrade costs should .NET become the computing standard. **BXM**

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