How the New Platforms vs. Products Debate Impacts Your Success

Tony Byrne

19 February, 2010

Key Takeaways

- "Platforms vs. Products" has replaced "Suites vs. Best of Breed" as the primary architectural debate in the content technology segments we cover

- Where a particular vendor offering sits on the Platform-Product continuum will play a significant role in how well the product fits your short- and long-term needs

- Product-oriented tools tend to trade short-term wins for long-term inflexibility, while platforms tend to offer long-term capabilities in exchange for higher near-term resource requirements

- In this light, enterprises considering new content technology investments will want to carefully re-examine business cases, ROI schedules, internal capacity, and maturity levels

Introduction

An important, yet rarely acknowledged architectural and product development shift has transpired over the past couple of years in the content technology marketplaces we cover. The debate has shifted from "Suites vs. Best of Breed" to "Platform vs. Product." This is partly a natural evolution in vendor marketing as technologies and marketplaces mature. Yet this shift also has profound implications for you, the customer. Beyond the normal criteria of cost, functional fit, and vendor fit, you need to assess a tool's position on the Platform-Product continuum against internal needs and capabilities.

Beyond Suites

If you participated in any of these marketplaces five years ago, the Suites vs. Best of Breed debate may remain fresh in your memory. Vendor marketers and customer selection teams dueled over competing visions: Do you buy a broadly functional suite of products from the likes of Documentum? Or, do you go with one or more products that are purpose built to do one thing reasonably well — like, say, Percussion's Web CMS?

While not all Product customers were satisfied, customer experience with multidimensional suites was almost uniformly disappointing. In particular, megavendor suites were less than sweet; they were often cobbled together, non-integrated products, and some of them were worst of breed. The likes of Autonomy and Open Text ultimately put the notion of an ECM Suite to rest by successfully acquiring and supporting multiple free-standing (often competing) point solutions. Of course, the Product choice was not (and is not) a panacea. Those customers who went best of breed frequently struggled to extend those offerings for more complex or industry-specific use cases.

Today the debate has morphed. Most big (and some small) vendors tout their "platform" capabilities: base frameworks that customers, integrators, or the vendors themselves can customize to meet a wide variety of potential use cases enterprises might need to address. The rise of "Industry Solutions," "Accelerators," "Kits," and the like are an attempt to make Platforms more palatable to customers seeking simpler solutions. Most (though not all) open source projects lean in the Platform direction. Most (though not all) SaaS offerings are more Product-like.

Platforms vs. Products

Recently we've seen the Platform vs. Product debate play out in various ways:

- Advent of highly specialized Search products
- Growing energy in the sub-platform level ECM mid-market
- Our new bifurcation of the Web CMS marketplace
- Redmond's apparent emphasis on customization over business-oriented features in the forthcoming SharePoint 2010
- A growing integration and consulting ecosystem around collaboration and community software markets
- Continuing emphasis on niche solutions in the DAM marketplace
- Enterprise Portals have reclaimed their identity as enterprise integration platforms

Perhaps most importantly, the slow evolution towards more Services-Oriented Architectures (SOAs) on behalf of both vendors and customers is pushing platform considerations, at a time when the economic climate tends to favor more productized solutions.

So the debate often rages within enterprises, and certainly among vendors and consultants. In fact, your own perspective could predispose you to one approach or the other. Consider these generalizations:

Typically Platform Oriented	Typically Product Oriented
IT Leadership: We can meet future demands	Business Users: It works today
Senior Management: We can cover multiple use cases with one investment	Line employees: Just solve my problem
Systems Integrators: We can accomplish whatever the client asks	End-user Companies: Keep it cheap, easy & fast

Of course, vendors want you to perceive their offerings as both a Platform and Product. ("It's out of the box, yet extensible!"). Don't believe it. To be sure, a single vendor like Open Text can sell Platforms — as well as Products — as separate tools. "Platform" and "Product" are not definitive categories; they are an architectural continuum.

Your Advisors' Biases

Your outside advisors have biases as well. At The Real Story Group, we tend to lean towards the Product side of the spectrum when buyers ask us to investigate their alternatives. (Of course that's not universal; we recently concluded a consulting engagement where the client chose among three large ECM platform vendors.) We've seen enterprises of all sizes struggle with platform-oriented tools as their overstretched IT and operations staff fail to get full value out of them. We've been arguing for ten years now that you typically run a greater risk of over-buying content technologies than under-buying.

Other analyst firms or consultancies often argue in favor of a more platform-oriented approach. Your organization's leadership may get pitched to consolidate to fewer strategic vendor relationships. There's no solid right or wrong here; get multiple opinions.

Conclusion

In particular, consider the following:

- Clarify whether your **business case calls for short-term ROI versus long-term capacity building**. Products typically offer the former at the expense of the latter. It's hard to achieve both from the same software.

- Similarly, when selecting vendors, have the **difficult internal conversation about present needs versus future flexibility**. Do this early in the process, or you'll be fighting it out later via vendor proxies.

- Now more than ever, ensure that Enterprise Architecture in your organization means **Business Architecture and not Systems Architecture**. In the absence of an accompanying business case, the pursuit of system elegance may trade away business value in exchange for IT benefits (like supplier consolidation).

- When evaluating platform vendors, **be wary of case studies**. Yes, that particular enterprise search platform may be able to "search across 1.3 petabytes of data regularly," but what would you have to do to get there — and stay there? When evaluating product vendors, **press for more decoupled services**. Do you really need yet another set of employee profile pages with that new wiki you installed?

- **Take a hard look at your internal capabilities and program-level maturity**. If you can boast comparatively advanced internal resources and experience, you could obtain a real competitive advantage by going with a platform rather than a product. If you're running lean, then admit that you can't address the complexity that comes with exploiting all that extra power, and consider more productized solutions.