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.Net Now: How Microsoft's Technology Is Winning Converts

By [Carolyn A. April](#), VARBusiness
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Two years ago, Jesse Shiah lived happily in the land of J2EE programming, working as part of a crack development team at Tragos, where he wrote custom Java applications for Global 2000 companies, including Hewlett-Packard and Motorola. He was quite literally a man in step with the times.






But times have changed. Today, Shiah's career path finds him at the helm of his own software firm, Ascentn, a business-process management (BPM) vendor in Mountain View, Calif. Despite an abiding love for the Java programming language, Shiah pulled a developer's 180 at Ascentn's inception, abandoning J2EE in favor of Microsoft's .Net framework and Visual Studio .Net tools. That's what he's using to build his AgilePoint BPMS product line. In some developers' circles, where commitment to a platform is akin to faith in a religion, the switch was tantamount to heresy. But for Shiah, who still lauds J2EE's technical might, moving to .Net. had nothing to do with techno-religion or vendor loyalty. It was simply smart business.

"I set two goals for this company: usability and value," Shiah says. "With .Net, we have been able to bring the cost of a BPM solution like ours down by five to 10 times that of J2EE. Everyone is looking for productivity and efficiency these days. And Microsoft helps you get it."

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.Net Drive

Shiah's story is increasingly common. Three years into its official existence, .Net is winning over a stable of productivity-minded pure-play ISVs, custom application-development VARs and systems integrators.

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Some say the momentum comes in spite of Microsoft, whose muddled messaging, woeful marketing and insufficient .Net training have been well-documented. Asked recently, Jerry Goguen, founder and CEO of IntraLearn Software and a .Net devotee, likened Microsoft's rollout of .Net to the well-worn story about the blind man and the elephant: When the man touches the elephant's trunk, he thinks he's gripping a

snake; when he touches the elephant's leg, he believes he's gripping a

"There was a tremendous amount of confusion about .Net, really about what it was," says Goguen, who, ironically, migrated his e-learning apps away from Java more than five years ago because of security problems. "I'm not sure Microsoft had its own act together. It was evolving on the fly."

Yet for all of Redmond's initial bumbling, .Net today is catching on like wildfire. Several recent developer surveys underscore the paradigm's growing popularity despite the lure of open-source tools and J2EE's open architecture and flexibility. A recent Evans Data study that tracks .Net usage shows a sharp increase in adoption. From spring 2003 to spring 2004, .Net development gained 6 percentage points among users. Today, 52 percent of those polled say they use .Net, up from 46 percent last year. What is more, 68 percent of those same respondents said they plan to develop applications using .Net by 2005, according to the report.

Want more proof .Net is taking off? Consider the following: In May, Forrester Research released a report that found 56 percent of developers polled consider .Net their primary development environment for 2004, compared with 44 percent for J2EE. In certain verticals, the percentage gap grows even wider; for example, 65 percent of developers working on public-sector projects said .Net was their primary platform vs. 35 percent for J2EE, while 64 percent of business-services developers led with .Net over 36 percent who led with J2EE. In VARBusiness' own State of Application Development survey, also completed in May, 53 percent of solution providers polled reported developing a .Net application in the past year, and 66 percent said they planned to build one in the next 12 months.

"Frankly, we were surprised to see [.Net] as dominant as it was," says Nick Wilcox, a research analyst at Forrester.

Credit a down economy for something, if you will, but the fact is that much of the .Net adoption is fueled by a thirst for business efficiency. A grassroots legion of developers see .Net as their ticket to creating software they can get to market quickly and cheaply, a must in this continued era of short-term projects and calls for instant ROI. In VARBusiness' State of Application Development survey, the No. 1 and No. 2 reasons respondents said they chose .Net as their primary development platform were ease of use and quicker time to market, respectively.

The fact is, for all its positive attributes, a J2EE-based application is just plain harder to develop, test and deploy. And the write-once-run-anywhere message

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associated with Java is, to some extent, a farcical myth. The fact is that each of the leading J2EE app servers, from IBM WebSphere to BEA WebLogic, features some proprietary extensions that must be addressed by developers in order for other J2EE apps to run on top of them.

Which brings us back to Ascentn's Shiah, who says the development time saved by using .Net over Java to build applications is proportional in scale to what C++ developers experienced when they first tried their hands at Java during the mid-'90s. Others in the ISV community believe that J2EE is nearing maturity.

"I really think it is reaching its zenith. It's not as innovative in addressing new requirements, and it has a bigger legacy base that acts as an anchor, determining where [J2EE] goes in the future," says Dr. Rob Miller, chief knowledge officer at Advanced Systems Technology (AST), a Lawton, Okla.-based systems and software engineering company. AST uses .Net as the foundation of its distance-learning, applications-hosting and integration business. AST has training contracts with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which is standardizing its multiagency systems on .Net, as well as with the U.S. Army. In a market already saturated with J2EE integrators, Miller says he sees a way to differentiate his business early on by getting in at the ground level with .Net.

Barriers Are Falling

It's not all about productivity, however. For one, Microsoft's servers, in general, have grown more scalable, enabling solution providers to build .Net applications that can stand up in an enterprise arena dominated by the J2EE platform. The long-awaited, much-delayed introduction of Longhorn, Microsoft's next-generation of Windows OS, will feature the .Net framework built right into the desktop, making the development of so-called smart clients even easier for solution providers.

Furthermore, .Net's bedrock foundation of XML and Web services are breaking down the natural integration barriers between Microsoft-based applications and other systems, which makes .Net apps increasingly viable for today's largely heterogeneous IT environments. By design, .Net apps still run better on Windows platforms (yes, it's that vendor lock-in thing), but no longer is it impossible for them to play nice in mixed settings. With the liberal application of Web-services wrappers, a .Net application for wireless devices in a warehouse, for example, can share data with J2EE applications on back-end servers or an Oracle database.

And that's critical, says one analyst, because J2EE is not going away, especially in the back of the house. "I definitely see an uptick in .Net adoption, but I don't see this [debate] as black-and-white like a few years ago," says Judith Hurwitz, president of Hurwitz & Associates IT consulting and analyst firm. "Developers like .Net and find it to be very cohesive and easy to build on. And because of the convergence around standards like Web services, third parties are able to build bridges between J2EE and .Net."

The Battle for ISVs

For years, Microsoft has ruled the developer roost, counting 9,000 official ISV partners in North America and tens of thousands of official and unofficial developers worldwide. Yet of late, it has been locked in a fierce battle with the likes of J2EE proponents and open-source developers, IBM in particular, to grab the hearts and minds of midmarket ISVs. IBM has aggressively, and quite successfully, tried to boost its profile with ISVs by claiming that Redmond's own presence in the applications market puts Microsoft in conflict with its apps partners. Indeed, a number of ISVs who build ERP or CRM applications and partner with Microsoft feel slighted by having to go head-to-head with such a powerhouse.

Microsoft has tried to combat this sentiment by selling ISVs on a new vision, one in which the ISVs create software that adds value on top of the Microsoft Business Solutions applications. So, rather than sell a general-accounting application, ISVs market a specific vertical-industry software component that extends MBS' Great Plains solutions.

This hasn't been the easiest sell for Microsoft, although, generally speaking, the company is preaching newfound sensitivity to ISVs' concerns. As part of its efforts, it is pushing .Net as a business tool. This week at its annual Worldwide Partner Conference, Microsoft officials are launching a raft of new benefits, programs and initiatives aimed at helping developers use .Net to make money off the Windows platform. In addition, at its recent TechEd conference, Microsoft launched Visual Studio Team System, an application life-cycle tools suite on par with offerings from IBM Rational and Borland that lends legitimacy to .Net as a development platform for not just client software but large-scale server-side applications.

"We have coalesced around Web services and XML, and I think that ISVs are starting to see the platform value and innovation we offer," says Sanjay Parthasarathay, corporate vice president of developer and platform evangelism at Microsoft. "[.Net messaging] wasn't right up front, but we have clarified immensely, and it shows."

Making the Most of .Net

Tim Huckaby is a .Net pioneer. As president and CEO of Interknowlogy, a custom app-dev solution provider in Carlsbad, Calif., Huckaby jumped on the .Net bandwagon nearly five years ago while it was still in stealth mode. He has seen the good, the bad and the ugly, but counts himself a true believer because of .Net's bang-for-the-buck proposition.

"Once you become savvy in the learning curve with .Net, you'll find that you can complete projects twice as quickly at two times the performance, and they are scalable," Huckaby says. "It makes it so darn easy to write software."

Many of Interknowlogy's projects involve using .Net to create smart clients. Smart clients, in a nutshell, possess characteristics of both Windows and Web applications, can run in disconnected mode, adapt to any hardware device and participate as a service in a services-oriented architecture. These bleeding-edge applications are the future, Huckaby is convinced. And once Microsoft puts the .Net framework on its Longhorn desktop operating system, it will dominate the space, in his opinion. Along those same lines, major integrator BearingPoint says .Net is becoming the standard in RFID implementations.

From a pure developer's perspective, Huckaby has a hunch that .Net is going to shift the Windows programmer landscape permanently. In particular, he believes that the traditional Win32 programmer, typically a highly skilled software architect and scarce resource, will become obsolete because .Net abstracts and simplifies the plumbing interfaces of Windows OSs to such a degree that .Net programming is akin to giving "power to the masses."

Defending J2EE

Clearly not everyone is enamored of .Net. J2EE stalwarts abound, especially those building extensive distributed applications at a server level. To them, .Net doesn't make the grade. Others just can't bring themselves to do business with Microsoft or dislike that applications are so tied to the overall software stack.

"With any Microsoft product, you can anticipate some limitations that prevent interoperability with other systems. That's just the way they do business," says Ed Weiss, director of marketing at ADS Retail, an Upper Marlboro, Md.-based IBM partner that sells Java-based, point-of-sale applications. "Quite frankly, .Net

didn't exist when we chose Java in 1997. It was a new player."

If he had the .Net/Java decision to make today, Weiss says he'd still go with Java because it is a proven programming language and because of its flexibility.

At the end of the day, the two development environments will continue to co-exist, but .Net is sending an enticing siren call to ISVs and app-dev solution providers that's hard to ignore.

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