

UBL Standard Needs Wider Use to Succeed

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The Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) has ratified Universal Business Language (UBL). But it will take time to be widely adopted and may compete with other standards.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 8 November 2004, OASIS announced that its members have ratified UBL version 1.0 as a standard. UBL defines a library of common business documents, such as purchase orders and invoices, and a set of data components (standard business vocabulary items) to construct other documents.

Analysis

UBL is a standardization of the Core Components Technical Specification for Electronic Business XML (ebXML). Combined with ebXML messaging, it will allow businesses to exchange data based on a common set of semantic standards.

OASIS is developing UBL in parallel with ebXML. This range of specifications provides a Web-based framework on which business-to-business collaborative commerce can be developed. UBL will supply business data in the form of semantic information needed for transactions beyond the messaging levels of ebXML. UBL can be used as a way to construct messages regardless of the use of ebXML. It can be used with any messaging framework, including Web services.

UBL is similar to two other standards in its modular approach to XML message construction. The first is Business Object Documents of the Open Application Group Integration Specification (OAGIS), although UBL is not transaction-oriented, as OAGIS is. The second is syntax outlined in Context Inspired Component Architecture (CICA) for XML messages, which is promoted by the Accredited Standards Committee X12 group (the source of electronic data interchange). Modular approaches with reusable components promise profound improvements over an approach where each industry creates unique data models to handle messaging requirements.

But it's still unclear which, if any, of the three standards (UBL, OAGIS and CICA) will gain widespread acceptance. For example, the U.S. car industry has used OAGIS to produce its Standards for Technology in Automotive Retail, which is a significant development effort. We have yet to see much implementation work with the other standards.

Recommendations

- Governments and other organizations should evaluate adopting UBL, but cannot anticipate widespread usage soon. UBL must gain broad adoption by 2008 if it is to have a significant impact.
- A vocabulary-based approach is invaluable for e-commerce and can save enormous effort in XML data modeling. Use the extent of UBL's adoption by specific industries to measure whether it is living up to its promise.

Analytical Sources: Rita Knox, Charles Abrams and Frank Kenney, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "Here's What's Wrong With XML-Defined Standards" — The relative ease of constructing XML standards for vertical domains has led to thousands of redundant and conflicting specifications. This chaos is the direct result of how these standards are developed. **By Rita Knox**
- "Hype Cycle for XML Technologies, 2004" — Since 1998, XML has grown from a little-known standard into a foundation of the Web computing infrastructure. Foundational

XML standards and a few domain-specific standards are key to this evolution. **By Rita Knox and others**

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