

2nd CEN/ISSS eBIF Conference on Interoperability – step by step to workable solutions

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A step-by-step approach to e-business interoperability, widely understood as the automated sharing of information within and between companies irrespective of their industry sectors and company size, was discussed at the 2nd eBIF Conference, held in Utrecht on 11-12 December 2006. Among the assertions from the meeting are that « Technology will become a commodity, and Information will be the differentiator ». This observation from the KPMG presentation is further underpinned by the Microsoft Keynote which noted that « people are the best exemplars of interoperability, and software is just there to help ».

The conference participants reviewed the achievements and challenges in relation to standardisation, practical research criteria and plans for FP7, collaboration with and between SMEs, cross functional standardisation services such as OASIS and the EIC (Enterprise Interoperability Centre), e-business standards developments in China, etc., and concluded with an open panel discussion. Copies of the presentations can be downloaded from http://www.cen.eu/cenorm/businessdomains/businessdomains/iss/activity/ebif_conf_programme.asp

Two major essential steps to workable solutions emerged from the presentations and panel discussion and will be further developed in the full report to be made available early in 2007 from the EQUENS and the CEN/ISSS web sites. These steps which represent areas on which eBIF, in collaboration with partners, will expand and build are :

- Better information about successful standards implementations
- Reduction in fragmentation, and elimination of gaps, in end-to-end standards developments and standards based e-business implementations

Success stories concerning interoperability in e-business identified in discussion included the open document format, the eCommerce Directive, the eZFlux standards implementation in the agricultural and food manufacturing industry, ICT applications used in the liberalisation of the energy sector, and instances being prepared by OASIS on the implementation and success of ebXML.

Guidance through the « jungle of standards », reduction in unnecessary fragmentation, as well as the business need for simplicity, will drive end-to-end standards developments across a wide range of complementary organisations. While fragmentation is not welcome, it was noted that diversity is good, as different organisations can collaborate in areas of common interest and adopt each others' work where relevant.

Interoperability is key to the revised Lisbon strategy and central to the survival and growth of Small and Medium Enterprises. Nonetheless interoperability remains an area to be tackled at various levels : there are business, non technical and technical challenges. Main problems to be tackled were better understanding of interoperability needs by business leaders, improved internal interoperability in large companies, SME participation in problem definition and search for solutions, and the need for a clear and harmonised legal framework.

eBIF is convinced that the way forward is strengthening partnership with other organisations active in e-business. eBIF is already collaborating with many fora and activities at international level. In Utrecht, eBIF and the Enterprise Interoperability Centre (EIC) announced discussions concerning a mutual collaboration arrangement.