e-Learning

Universal Business Language (UBL) Going Global

By W. Hugh Chatfield I.S.P.

W. Hugh Chatfield I.S.P. is President of CyberSpace Industries 2000 Inc. - XML Training and Consulting. CyberSpace Industries has been a licensee of hands-on XML ans XSL materials from Crane Softwrights for a number of years.

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The Extnsible Markup Language (XML) was originally designed to enable the exchange of information across the Internet. Prior to XML web sites used embedded Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) to inform Internet Browsers how to display the information, but said nothing about what the data was. XML allowed the definition of embedded markup to precisely define what the data is. Instead of generic display tags like <html>, <h1>, <p>, <o1>, your could use tags like <invoice>, <currency>, <amount> so that a computer process could do more with the information than merely display it. Hands-on XML training is now quite common.

XML allows you to develop sets of markup tags for any problem domain. In practice what happens is that major players in a particular problem domain will form a pre-competitive consortium to come to agreement about the set of tags to be used in that problem domain. This has led to the definition of major sets of markup in various problem domains such as MATHML for mathematics, Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) for vector graphics, and Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language (SMIL) for interactive multimedia delivery.

A major problem domain is of course, conducting business globally. All companies in the world understand information objects such as Purchase Orders, Packing Slips, Invoices, etc. A majority of the flow of this class of information between companies is accomplished via paper copies, with each receiving company re-keying this information into their own business systems. OASIS is a not-for-profit global consortium whose purpose is to support their international membership in the development, convergence and adoption of e-business standards. One particular effort of this group is the development of the Universal Business Language (UBL) that defines a royalty-free library of these standard business documents as electronic XML documents. UBL was developed in an open and accountable OASIS Technical Committee with participation from a variety of industry data standards organizations. UBL is designed to "plug directly into existing business, legal, auditing, and records management practices, eliminating the re-keying of data in existing fax and paper-based supply chains and providing and entry point into electronic commerce for small and medium-sized businesses".

The idea of course, is not to change all the business practices and existing business systems across the planet, but merely to define a common way to exchange this information electronically; make it economical enough for small and medium-sized businesses to adopt and for vendors of existing business software to add support of this international standard to their existing products.

Denmark was a very early adopter of this new standard. What was unique about the Danish implementation was that it combined the choice of an international, open standard (UBL) within a legislative framework. On February 1, 2005, e-invoicing became mandatory (by law) for all public entities and their suppliers. If you wanted to invoice the Danish government, it had to be done electronically using the UBL standard for an invoice. This suddenly made UBL of great interest to a very large number of companies of all sizes.

With some 18 million invoices being exchanged each year, the Danish government expected to have significant savings through elimination of re-keying of all this information. A conservative estimate is that 10 minutes can be saved in the handling of each invoice once invoices are received electronically. This adds up to a total savings of 94 million Euros. Further, is on average an additional 7 minutes can be saved if an automatic match between an electronic order and an electronic invoice can be made, the total savings potential is approximately 160 million Euros per year with a fully implemented ordering and invoicing process.

Many of the Nordic and European countries, and some parts of North America have now initiated projects to adopt at least some part of the UBL standards. From initial implementation activity of this international standard, it can be noted that several derivative initiatives emerge.
1. Creation of supporting companies geared to provide software and consulting supporting the unencumbered open standard.
2. The need for awareness in both government and business of the availability and benefits of supporting a global e-commerce standard for business documents.
3. The need for UBL training for the adoption of UBL in your organization and with the organizations with which you conduct business.

It is interesting that the first organization to develop and roll out hands-on UBL training globally is a Canadian company, Crane Softwrights Ltd. Mr. G. Ken Holman is the Chief Technology Officer for Crane Softwrights Ltd., the current secretary of the ISO subcommittee for the SGML family of standards, the current chair of two OASIS UBL subcommittees, one of the editors of the upcoming UBL 2.0 release of the standard former chair and member of other international committees, a published author and an accomplished speaker. Crane Softwrights Ltd. has training licensees around the world to deliver their training modules.

References:
CyberSpace Industries 2000 Inc.: http://www.urbanmarket.com/csi2000

Crane Softwrights Ltd.: http://www.cranesoftwrights.com
UBL: http://www.oasis-open.org/committees/tc_home.php?wg_abbrev=ubl