

Timing Your Migration to XML

There is no compelling reason to leave EDI but you will, eventually.



A papiNet Whitepaper

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EDI is a viable technology that can provide value for years to come.

- EDI provides a standard method of communicating business information in a efficient manner
- EDI has a large installed base
- There is robust support for EDI by third-parties

But...

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papiNet Contact Information

Bengt Roslund – papiNet Europe
Bengt.Roslund@sca.com
+32 (2715) 4807

David Steinhardt – papiNet North America
dsteinhardt@idealliance.org
+1 703.837.1066

We are approaching the end of the EDI lifecycle.

Despite all of this we are approaching the end of the EDI lifecycle. Not so much because of issues with EDI but because of the benefits and overwhelming presence of XML. While XML doesn't necessarily have a clear advantage over EDI in any single technical area it does provide benefits for tool developers, programmers, and infrastructure parties.

Even though XML doesn't provide you with a clear-cut reason to migrate from EDI (you already have your application written so why do you need to "eXtend" anything), XML's extensibility does provide tool vendors a large incentive to provide XML enabled tool's. The market for an XML enabled tool is much larger than an EDI enabled tool. XML appeals to users across the entire spectrum of enterprises from large enterprises to small and medium enterprises to the end-user creating XML documents in their word processor.

The penetration of XML and related internet concepts has already happened in colleges, universities, and grade-schools. The internet is pervasive and XML as the coin-of-exchange of information on the internet is the tool that is sought after and taught. Will EDI savvy programmers disappear overnight? No. Will it be more challenging to locate the talented ones? Yes.

The pervasiveness of XML in our environment has lead to improvements

in our infrastructure to handle the verbosity of XML messages. EDI was marginally better but it still is a bandwidth hog. Compression techniques, XML enabled storage facilities, and XML facilitated routing optimization are all developments that improve the infrastructure's ability to handle the volume of data being transferred.

Can you ignore XML?

Quite frankly, No.

You could try to contain XML; only using XML in those applications that make use of the improved collaboration that the internet permits. The integration of outsourced, non-core activities into your information flow is probably the most important development that the internet along with XML will facilitate. For the paper and forest supply chain the integration of transport and logistics information into the information flow is critical to increased competitiveness.

Can you obtain the internet benefits (cheap communications, broad penetration, and collaborative processing) and still cling to the EDI environment? Up to a certain point. You can take the developments that arise in the XML world and retrofit them to your EDI environment. You can transfer information from your enterprise systems to XML when using internet-enabled technologies while separately maintaining your EDI communications.

However, you will run into difficulties. EDI is just not prepared to compete in

an environment where expectations for rapid response are high. XML communication tools are designed to do both the heavy lifting that EDI does as well as having the ability to manage a rapid message turn around. Frequently before the sender disconnects the session.

You will be living in two worlds.

You probably are already. The world of EDI and the world of XML. There is a cost associated with staffing your company with tools, training, and personnel in two environments. Especially when the needs of the EDI environment can be readily met by the XML environment, and then some. XML has grown-up in an environment trail-blazed by EDI, able to improve on the EDI concept while supporting the additional capabilities related to the rise of the internet.

Most likely the critical point will occur when you are forced to use XML for the first time. The point in time when an external force, beyond your control, requires you to deliver XML capabilities. Whether it is the requirements of a key customer or your analysis that using XML is the best tool for the particular job at hand.

Regardless of what first brings you to the XML world you will be unable to ignore XML. There will not be an obvious transition point but there will be the need to staff, purchase new enabling tools, and learn new security procedures. You will have two environments.

How did this happen?

Were you wrong to embrace EDI when it came out? Will the same thing happen when you embrace XML? No, you weren't wrong when you embraced EDI. Who could have foreseen the impact that a pervasive internet would have on the cost of delivering information? For that matter the cost of delivering a product?

Will the same thing happen to XML? Probably yes, but who knows when and in what form.

Let's compare the EDI situation to the XML situation. EDI achieved a degree of penetration into large enterprises for the communication of bulk transactions. It is quite possible that if events had continued without the advent of the internet EDI would have achieved a position in small and medium enterprises over time.

However, that didn't happen. The introduction of the internet and the subsequent adoption by browsers of HTML provided a bottom-up alternative to the communication of data. Presenting information on the user's screen lead to the need to enrich that information by the user for subsequent return to the original presenter with the need to integrate that into the back-office system.

Could EDI have filled this vacuum? Certainly. Did it? Nope.

EDI on mainframes was not "available" to the personal environment of the web. History wasn't writ that way.



Things go from bad to worse for EDI

The premise of this article is that you will migrate to XML eventually. We state in one of the leading paragraphs that the first point of pain will be the cost of the talent associated with legacy EDI platforms. This will not be a generational change, if it was we'd be talking about 20 to 30 years of life left in EDI but a change that will be driven by the availability of tools to support the XML environment that will rapidly outstrip the productivity of what can be done with EDI.

How much trouble are you in?

Depending on the size of your budget either a lot of trouble or not very much trouble. If you have a lot of money to spend on two environments (staffing, tools, and training) then you can support your EDI environment for a long time to come. However, if your budget is more constrained then you should be looking for a way out of your EDI environment as soon as possible. The transition is not difficult and if you provide enough time for it you will be able to make it a seamless one.

Ironically, those companies with the larger budgets who are able to either ignore XML or staff two environments lose in the long-run because they will not take advantage of the collaboration that XML brings to their existing business processes.

Where do you go from here?

This article only touches on the issues facing EDI users. The goal is to make

the case that you cannot ignore XML and even if you could you would not want to. This is the future, as we see it, we are anxious to discuss your vision. Please contact us at www.papiNet.org if you want to comment on this article or if you want more information on:

- How to make the transition from EDI to XML seamlessly.
- How the papiNet business processes can improve supply chain efficiency.
- How to implement the papiNet messages.

About the author

Art Colman is the Technical Director of papiNet, the global standards initiative for paper and forest products. He is the President of Drybridge Consulting, a provider of XML/XSLT solutions, development support, and training.



Art can be reached by email at colman@drybridge.com